CONRAD
AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

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Souvenirs by J. H. Retinger



DRAWINGS BY FELIKS TOPOLSKI

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Contents

These memoirs were finished a few weeks before this war started and hence represent the pre-war outlook on life and letters. Many shortcomings may be due to the fact that the author, otherwise engaged during the war, had no time or opportunity to revise them.

LONDON, *5th June* 1941.



The Author's Apologia

THESE *souvenirs of mine are not intended to form a history of Conrad's life or a biography, even less a study of his art of writing. As simply as I can, I will describe him as I knew him, retell his conversations as I remember them, recall his familiar haunts, evoke his family folks and friends as they appeared to me, and relate what I heard from Conrad's lips about himself and his art. I will*

surround him with his contemporaries, those I knew myself and those he told me about. I will try to explain what were the bonds which tied him to the countries we belonged to: to England which I first saw through his eyes; to Poland to which both of us owed everything, and where I took him back after an absence of some thirty years.

An attentive reader, a scrupulous searcher may find in the following pages statements not in accord with Conrad's own words printed elsewhere, or with declarations of people who had known him intimately. As to that, I will point out that here I am transcribing on paper my souvenirs as they come into my mind. Obviously I may be occasionally in error, but the discrepancies may not necessarily be due to my imagination or my faulty memory. For it must be remembered that any man at different moments of his life, and on different occasions, proffers different thoughts, not seldom at variance with each other. Conrad, the most erratic of men, the most temperamental of artists and—when it came to personalities surrounding him—a gentleman of manners belonging to the old school, has been more given to change both the wording and the meaning of his judgments than anyone I have known—for he did

not want to antagonize his interlocutors by differing from them in his statements, unless he chose to do it purposely.

. . . .

Conrad was, maybe, a born writer, but he was not brought up to become one, and certainly during his early life he never wished or even thought of taking up authorship as a profession.

No possible hero for another Boswell, he never attained or attempted the ways of professional artists. He never belonged to a literary school or coterie; indeed, he started his literary career among the most uncongenial surroundings and wrote in a language which was not his own.

I met him for the first time some six or seven years after the publication of his first novel, and I used to see him frequently during the following ten years, when his work took on an Olympic grandeur, and his fame began to invade the world. I had the blessed opportunity of watching him grow content with his life and his achievements, getting his share of recognition and honours from his fellow-artists, and being hailed as an immortal genius by the unknown masses of the reading public.

I have read many books written around his per-

sonality: analytical essays, studies in historical research, literary criticism, scholarly biographies. Most of them seem to me misleading, some because they look for thoughts and ideas which Conrad abhorred, others because they try to make him out the sort of man he ought to have been but what in reality he was not. I knew him as a human being first and last, a Pole in his mannerisms and everyday ways, but at the same time a man of the world, a representative of his period—in fact, the most representative European. His heritage was universal, as were the subjects of his mental activities. I will attempt to describe his person in the only way I can, namely, as one of the central figures within my own mental and spiritual evolution; and I will try to bring back to life again those days of his of which I was witness.

CONRAD

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CHAPTER ONE



In Poland

ARNOLD BENNETT writes in his *Diary* on the tenth of June 1909: "Godebski and his wife, and Maurice Ravel and a nameless boy of about 20 came yesterday very late for tea. My previous very agreeable impression of the Godebskis was confirmed."

I was this nameless lad, and that is how I was

introduced to the English people, English literature and to England.

Up to then my life had been rather like Conrad's in his teens. I spent my childhood in the same town of Cracow as he did; went to school to the same *gymnasium* of St Anne's, where he was taught the rudiments of knowledge. I lived, in fact, in the house opposite the one he inhabited some twenty years before: No. 2, Wislna, mine being the number 3.

Our education also, as far as its external aspects are concerned, had been very similar, as must have been our early reflections on life.

When later we were swapping reminiscences of our childhood it struck me not seldom how exactly alike they were—with one significant difference: my childhood was happy, dull, tedious to an insufferable degree, while Conrad's early years were unhappy, romantic, surrounded with the nimbus of his parents' heroic sacrifice, and full of pathetic, but most interesting, shadows and ghosts.

Our reactions to our environment were similar, and they were bound to be similar, despite the lapse of years, since little had changed, under the surface, in Poland between the time of Conrad's

childhood and my own. A few more men died for their patriotic convictions; a few more were imprisoned or went into exile. Life went on without the excitement of international activities as in England, the United States or France, without pride in the present, without hope for the future. In Cracow, indeed, there were few, if any, changes from the seventies, when Conrad was going through the routine of his daily classes, to the nineties, when I used to trot at eight in the morning to school and return in the early afternoon.

As fast as life ran through my fingers in later years, as fast as it coloured subsequently Conrad's wanderings in search of adventure, so slowly and dully it trickled in Cracow, when we were boys, twenty years apart, in a country with, at this time, no elbow-room for individual exuberance.

We, Polish youngsters of the later part of the nineteenth century, felt like helpless automatons, moving blindly in mansions of many rooms, which once were painted with glory and splendour, but now were tarnished, because untouched by the brush of new accomplishments. The history of Poland had been at a standstill for over a century. Dust of many sorrowful years covered the multi-

coloured traditions of the past; windows were barred with grilles of inept impossibilities, doors were closing on themselves, giving way only to those who had the impudence or the indignity to abandon the past—or so it seemed to me, and so it must have looked to Conrad.

His father, as any reader of *My Personal Record* will remember, had been one of the great patriots of his country, but also the most unlucky. Caught by the Tzarist police before his political plans were ripe, he was dragged into prisons and finally sent into exile. Everywhere he went, his wife, who soon died from the hardships of those wanderings, accompanied him, together with his infant son. Broken in health, he was left to die in Cracow, the intellectual capital of the semi-free part of Poland, which was under Austrian domination.

Apollo Korzeniowski, the father of Theodor *Joseph Konrad* Korzeniowski, according to what I have heard from his son and from men who had known him, had no other thoughts but those for his country; no life but the life of a patriot. He was like a sentimental miser, living for self-sacrifice, saving every breath, every atom of personal happiness for his motherland. Wife, child, fam-

ily were for him details of minor consideration.

Such a mentality was far from being uncommon in the generations which preceded mine and Conrad's. They had existed in each Polish generation from the original downfall of the country to the present day.

As a child Conrad must have been told innumerable times how his heroic uncle ate dog flesh, a poignant story, which Conrad retells in his "Reminiscences" with a vivacity and punctiliousness of description which proves how deeply it was stamped on his mind, just as I was told again and again about my father's and my grandfather's adventures in the Polish rebellions against the hated Russians.

Add to such mental imagery the actual aura of the city of Cracow: its hundred churches, each of them a reliquary of some past splendor, an unending procession of architectural glory—and the drabness of everyday life. Cracow the most beautiful of ancient towns—and the most uninspiring. The magnificent, glittering past haunting every corner of the street—and the dull trend of daily lessons.

In opposition to the past, the present in Cracow did not supply any spiritual food for youthful,

adventurous imagination—there was, indeed, a complete lack of faith in it. In fact, the greatest festivities of the town were celebrations in honor of men dead a long time ago, of those who had toiled and suffered for Poland. Festivities of mourning!

In my childish imagination the part of Cracow which was not a temple or a museum, was a cemetery!

The life of a boy like Conrad, with a bright and adventurous disposition, was bound to be most painfully impressed by the atmosphere of hopelessness in which he found himself in Cracow. He was lonely, with his sad and dying father; more lonely still when his father died and he boarded in a house kept by the Georgeon ladies. They were described to me often, not only by Conrad but—rare coincidence—also by relatives of my first wife, to whom they were distantly related.

There were three of them: Madame Georgeon, an old Polish lady, who had married a descendant of French *émigrés* settled in Poland, and her two spinster daughters, who at that time were past middle age. I believe the last one died only a few



years before the War. They took care of boys of good families at school in Cracow.

Refined and perfumed, prim and snobbish, for many years they made their living out of this *pension* in which the fatherless Conrad, as a boy, spent, according to himself, the saddest hours of his life, notwithstanding the evident care of the Georgeon females.

At that time he had few friends, with the exception of Konstanty Buszczynski, also a son of a Polish patriot and minor poet himself. Buszczynski later in his life became well known as an agriculturist. Conrad did not meet him after their schooldays until I brought him back to Poland in 1914.

Bored at his *pension,* Conrad was also bored at school, conducted according to the Austrian system, in which the memorizing of Latin and Greek poetry was still the main object of study. No word was mentioned of contemporary history, only dead literature and art were taught, while the higher Austrian authorities took offence at any too evident attempt to explain things Polish to the boys.

Although at school I was surrounded by a more congenial atmosphere, and education was already

on a higher level, with patriotism shared by teachers and pupils alike, still I can well understand Conrad's boredom and ennui, because the cause of it was still there. The antiquated educational system, slightly refurbished, remained still unchanged, and above all there was the same aroma of tradition, buried glory, vanquished hopes. The same atmosphere permeated the town: the relentless, hopeless, the most unselfish love for a country which did not exist.

Our boyish reactions—Conrad's, mine, and those of thousands of other Polish lads of the same age—were controlled by the past, the discipline of which we were bound to accept, by the everlasting sadness of our surroundings, by the tedium of living among the dead, by the exertion of moving among the exalted.

I would not relinquish my past, and the inner dictates of my tradition, but at the same time my youthful, active mind urged me to look for new and wider horizons, to keep the faith of my fathers but to live the life of the modern European. Hence—unconscious opportunist—while rejoicing in the sadness of my heritage, I wished to combine the opportunities of the present world with my patriotic duties by stepping outside the geo-

graphical pale of Polish nationalism. I wanted to live unhampered by frontiers and passports, by the sinister atmosphere of the past, by the bitter disappointment of the present, but still devote my work to my country. I decided to get acquainted with what is greatest outside the boundaries of Poland, and later to serve my country by bringing Poland back into international activities.

Conrad's decision had to be made some twenty years earlier in different conditions, since his own people were either dead or scattered round the world, while in his comparative isolation his own personal outlook did not seem so promising as my own. He was of a more romantic disposition, and certainly less given to hair-splitting self-analysis. He resolutely decided against the past. Without becoming a renegade, he decided to live in his own way. He chose a road totally new, different and alien to the one followed by the people to whom he belonged, but in no way opposed to them. To paraphrase the biblical saying, if he sinned against his past it was by omission and not by commission.

Thus Conrad chose the easier way—or perhaps the more difficult. The consequence was that he became one of the great writers of modern times, and I . . . I am writing my souvenirs of Conrad.

CHAPTER TWO



In France

CONRAD as a boy of seventeen decided against staying in his own country, and made up his mind to go abroad in search of life. The orphaned youngster had only one member of his family to reckon with, his maternal uncle and legal guardian Pan Tadeusz Bobrowski. Conrad was extremely devoted to this uncle of his and, although rather reticent about others of his kin, never tired of talking about this old companion of his father, a descendant of an ancient Polish family, who,

having the right to a title, dropped it in obedience to his principles, which were disgustingly democratic.

Bobrowski, at the time Conrad was preparing to leave Cracow, was a man in the early forties, a healthy, well-to-do landowner in the Ukraine, who made a religion out of patriotism and democracy. He too, like Conrad's father, had been among the leaders of the last Polish rebellion against the Russians, but, more lucky than his older cousin, had escaped without suffering any lasting harm from its consequences. An old bachelor, he lived alone on his estate, paying from time to time a visit to his beloved and lonely ward in Cracow. Readily he sanctioned Conrad's scheme of uprooting, so much the more as the lad had practically no fortune left, and there were no prospects for him to make a suitable career in Russian Poland.

The choice of the country was obvious: France was the centre which most attracted any boy of Conrad's social class and position. Children in Poland in the upper strata of society had as a matter of course a French tutor or governess (mostly Swiss or Belgian) and were brought up on the French educational system, chatting in French

from their earliest childhood. In fact, during the whole of the nineteenth century this system prevailed all over the Continent. France also had a powerful sentimental appeal for all the Poles, who during the Napoleonic wars fought together with the French against their common enemies, the Russians and Austrians. They were well received in France after Poland's final debacle, where they found political asylum and congenial company. After the insurrections against the Russians they took refuge in France, and in the second half of the nineteenth century there were tens of thousands of Polish exiles and *émigrés* living in France. Their number was so great that there was practically no family left in Poland which did not have some relatives and close connections in France. As at the same time most of the higher institutes of learning in German and Russian Poland were either abolished or had the Polish language excluded from their curriculum, the sons of well-to-do families rounded off their education with a course at the French schools.

Conrad too had relatives abroad, political *émigrés* or their descendants. There were the Poradowski's in Belgium, the Brunow's in Switzerland, and the Chodzko's in Marseilles.

The Chodzko's were another ancient Polish family, which produced some well-known writers and scholars, and some of the most exalted patriots and most fervent participants in the Polish risings against the partitioning Powers. After the Polish insurrections many of them were forced to emigrate and to seek refuge abroad—some in South America, some in Turkey, and some in France. The branch of the Chodzko's established in Marseilles made their living in dealing with the French Mercantile Marine, and enjoyed a well-deserved respect among the richer bourgeois class of the metropolis of the south of France.

Thus Conrad left Cracow in the seventies after a farewell visit by his uncle Bobrowski, who hastened to see him before his departure, bringing him a few family reliques, old papers, faded photographs, and a copy of the epic *Pan Tadeusz,* the greatest masterpiece of Polish poetry, published some forty years before by the most famous Polish poet: Adam Mickiewicz. This parting gift, a few likenesses of his nearest kin, some sheets of yellow paper, and two volumes bound in black linen, were the only Polish mementoes which Conrad kept intact his whole life and which he showed me almost forty years later with great emotion when

I first met him at Capel House, in Kent. "Nothing else have I saved," he once told me, "from my inheritance but these faded daguerreotypes and this book, which I never tired of reading on my unending journeys."

With a tutor he set off for France via Vienna and Switzerland. It was in the Alps during a climbing expedition that the first inkling came to his mind that there might be something interesting in a sailor's life. The episode which started his imagination working on the subject was of very little importance, but according to him it was the dawn of new vistas for his mind. For some reason or other his tutor produced a big knife of the type used now by boy-scouts, and the tutor's casual remark that such a knife is an article of first necessity to a seafaring man opened vistas to Conrad's ambitions.

Yet when he arrived in Marseilles he was still undecided as to his future plans. He drifted into some business, which was offered him through the Chodzko's, and which was connected with shipping. He never liked to talk much about his life in Marseilles, but one could gather from his reluctant words that his was the typical life of *jeunesse dorée* with good connections. One can

imagine him easily: a stocky, healthy, good-looking young fellow, with plenty of loose coin in his pockets, playing at being a sailor in the smart uniform of a naval *élève,* with one thought only in his mind—how best to enjoy himself, tasting life. The Cannébière and the Hotel de Noailles must have seen a lot of him, for ever afterwards, notwithstanding the fact that he had visited three-quarters of the globe, Cannébière, the noisy and elegant thoroughfare, had a particular sentimental appeal for him, and he always remembered it as the most adventurous, most enticing, most glamorous avenue of world cities. I do not think that girls even then played a great rôle in his life. As is usual for very manly men, they were necessary for him to form a background for the scenery of his life; they were the completion of a perfect circle. They never, however, became the central figures of any important episode in his career as a man of the world. The subject of his life during the Marseilles period was adventure, with zest added by the element of danger, of the unsuspected, the mysterious. He lived from episode to episode, like a healthy animal, carefree, enjoying every moment, and trying to cram into the shortest space of time the utmost adventure. The social position

of the Chodzko's enabled him to meet anybody in town he desired, while his family's revolutionary antecedents made it possible for him to be trusted by all revolutionary dealers in war and democracy: Carlists or Mexican rebels.

He embraced with spirit a proposition to smuggle arms into Mexico, up the Rio Grande, in Brownsville opposite Matamoros, on the frontier, where he had a gorgeous time, basking in the tropical sun and watching the violent reactions of swarthy Mexicans. During this, his only sojourn in Latin-American countries, he discovered the mechanism of Latin-American psychology, which later he admirably reproduced in *Nostromo*.

Then he tried his luck in the Spain of the Carlists, acting as a kind of confidential agent on missions that are usual in revolutions. Then he went to the Black Sea, still resounding with war.

But in adventuring he never was and never tried to be the central figure, the dare-devil who provokes adventure, who attracts danger, whose bare appearance is a sign for something ominous to happen. He wanted to see adventure, to fondle it as one fondles a piece of velvet, to admire it, to understand it, and to keep it in his memory as one keeps the remembrance of a subtle scent for

the rest of one's lifetime. But he refused to be a mere witness, an observer looking at it with a calculating mathematical eye. No, he must be a part of it, active enough to make the adventure move along without making himself conspicuous and stealing the show for himself.

While he played the Argonaut, with headquarters in Marseilles or in Surubaya, now or later —in life or letters—he was collecting material (unconsciously at first) to be sorted, digested, and, maybe, retold later on.

He was also completing his French education, breathing the air of France, learning how things were done in the country which he regarded as the most civilized.

. . . I too followed the call of France, and arrived in Paris in my eighteenth year.

Conrad jumped right into sunny Marseilles, like a young boy going to a dance; I landed in Paris, at the Sorbonne, the centre of learning, bent on knowing everything and everybody who might serve me to acquire a sure knowledge of international affairs.

My family connections made the task of meeting everybody comparatively easy. My guardian, after my father's death, was Count Wladyslaw



Joseph Conrad Korzeniowski ·
1874 – on his arrival
at Marseille

Zamoyski, the head of one of the richest and oldest Polish families, but born in France, a French citizen and related to most of the old conservative families of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. My cousins the Godebski's, also of Polish origin, settled in France three generations hence, were at the time of my first arrival in Paris, and ever afterwards until their death, one of the most be-

loved couples in the literary and artistic world of Paris.

If ever there was a saint on earth Zamoyski was one. Ascetic to the point of sleeping on bare boards until his death at the age of sixty-six, he never spent an unnecessary penny on himself, at the same time distributing his whole enormous revenues anonymously—sometimes through me as intermediary—for charitable ends. When Poland was reborn, while enjoying perfect health, he offered his whole fortune for public utility institutions: hundreds of thousands of acres of land, factories, palaces, fabulous collections of art objects, a famed library, reserving for himself, until he died, just one room. Luckier than most dreamers, he died soon after he made this foundation, which is now being mismanaged by careless trustees. Fanatically self-sacrificing, he never married, because he dedicated his life to the purposes he cared for: the service of his country and his religion. One of the most handsome men of his generation, he was so strong that I saw him once stopping a carriage drawn by four horses by catching its wheel with his bare hand. Not intolerant of others, he preached by deeds, and not by words.

Through him I met some of the most dis-

tinguished Catholic clergymen of France, of whom I remember best Monseigneur Baudrillart, a round, rosy-cheeked, smiling, venerable prelate; an honest man, an eminent scholar, and a famous historian. Zamoyski introduced me to the Comtesse de Castries. Her *salon* on the rue du Bac was as famous for its marvellous *boiseries* dating from the middle of the eighteenth century as for its distinguished visitors, who as a rule belonged to the old military families of France. Her husband was for many years a trusted and beloved collaborator of the renowned Marshal Lyautey, whom I met several times during the War. The best proconsul France ever had, the man who pacified and organized Morocco, famous for his short, cutting aphorisms, he could not fit into the political democratic *régime* of continental France. After he was appointed Minister of War I heard him saying with satisfaction: *"J'aime la démocratie à condition d'en être le patron."* Alas, great military commander that he was, he did not know how to assume the rôle of a political boss; he did not know how to withstand Parliamentary criticism and opposition, and he was soon forced to tender his resignation, and to retire to his beloved Morocco. Short in stature, but massive, stiff in movements,

his military abruptness gave him a superficial likeness to Lord Kitchener, with whom he had mentally much in common. There were others too: for instance, the son of the Comtesse de Castries, the Marquis de Dampierre, has been for many years my most loyal friend and companion in the quest for idealistic *fantasmagories*.

I met also in Paris—but not through Zamoyski—the Marquis de Castellane, the famous "Boni," the smartest, the best-looking, the wittiest, the most beloved of all the dandies of pre-War France. A particular friend *du Prince de Galles*, later King Edward VII, he was married to Annie Gould, the richest heiress of America. For several years Boni had at his disposal the twelve million dollars of her yearly income, which he spent on elegance, on building the much-admired pink marble palace in the Avenue du Bois (now Avenue Foch), in fêtes and entertainments. Once, for instance, he gave a banquet in honour of the Prince of Wales at the Pavillon de Bagatelle, in the Bois de Boulogne, which cost him over half a million francs (in gold). Notwithstanding his triumphal progress among the *monde qui s'amuse*, he was astonishingly well read in historical and artistic matters, had a deep knowledge of politics, and his opinions

were valued by the greatest statesmen of Europe; by old Lord Lansdowne, then rarely emerging from his retirement, as well as by Leon Blum, at that time a correspondent of the paper *Comœdia* and a tyro in socialistic politics. Castellane, in fact, knew how to combine pleasure with political intrigues, and for a time succeeded in getting himself elected to the Chamber of Deputies, in which he delivered some good and witty speeches. He was indeed a sort of link between the Court of Versailles of the eighteenth and the Congress at Versailles in the twentieth century For many years, until his death, he honoured me with his friendship (in fact, there are a few friendly words about me in his Memoirs, published under the title: *L'art d'être pauvre*), and through him I met that section of French society which, alien in spirit and poise to the environment of Count Zamoyski, kept up in the twentieth century the traditions of Louis XV and the Regent.

But when in Paris I spent most of my time in the artistic atmosphere of the Godebski's home. The great-grandfather of the husband had been a fine Napoleonic soldier, killed in a battle against the Austrians. He had also been well known as a minor poet. His father was famous as a sculptor

in his day, and even more famous as a *beau* of the Second Empire and a friend of the gilded Bohemians of those days, Villiers de l'Isle Adam, Barbey d'Aurevilly, etc.

Even in his old age he was exceptionally good-looking, with a most subtle profile, big dark eyes, and snow-white hair dressed in the way Paderewski later made popular. Among the countless stories of his escapades I like the following best, because it characterizes more than anything his ready wit and impetuosity. Once when walking on a rainy day along the dirty, badly paved streets of Paris he saw a pretty, well-dressed girl, dismal and hesitating before crossing the muddy street. Godebski, without the slightest hesitation, took her in his arms and carried her across. But the girl, once safe on the other side of the road, angry at the cheek of an unknown young man, gave vent to her indignation and in plain words expressed her anger at his cavalier-like ways. She must have been very bitter and very offensive, because, without thinking twice, he once more lifted her bodily, carried her back to the spot where he picked her up—and left with a bow.

His son, my cousin and friend, Cyprien Godebski, affectionately called Cipa, was an exceptional

creature, a great would-be artist, and wholly unproductive and totally incapable of expressing himself. His sterility was due partly to his physical infirmities, he having both his right arm and right leg crippled, and partly to an inherent laziness, which was intensified by the fact that he had a sufficient income for his needs. I have met few men so exquisitely perceptive of all art sensations, so full of emotion when facing a new aspect of beauty, and so unselfish in their appreciation and admiration as Godebski. What made him especially beloved by his friends was his unstinting praise when he liked a thing, and his lucid criticism when expressing disapproval. Jovial and full of vivacity, he was always on the alert for new discoveries and fresh artistic sensations.

His wife, Ida, was the most perfect companion of this man of artistic passions, hampered by infirmities. Intelligent, quiet, easy-tempered, she had perception of beauty without the hunger for it; she was its friend and not its worshipper. She could appreciate intelligently a masterpiece, but was never on the look-out for such. I used to say that to admire a thing she must first handle it, *mettre la main dessus.*

They were a most united couple amidst their

Bohemian surroundings, and the pretty and admired woman married to an infirm husband never left him for a single night, until some twenty years after her wedding-day she was suddenly obliged to go to Poland alone and stay there for a month or so.

There was also a half-sister of Cipa, famous for her beauty, elegance, and wit in the Parisian smart society of the Third Republic. She married in turn a North Pole explorer, an editor of a famous literary review, the owner of the most important newspaper of his time, notorious for the political power he exercised through discreet blackmail, and finally a wealthy painter, who specialized in canvases of enormous dimensions. The well-known *pince sans rire* and cartoonist, Forain, on being asked how those paintings were transported, replied with nonchalance: *"Ça se dégonfle."*

I best remember Mme M. by her saying, when once suicide was discussed in her presence: *"Me suicider—je préfererai mourir."* The fact is, she did attempt suicide some time later by taking poison, and it was a miracle of medical skill that she ever recovered.

When, in 1906, I arrived in Paris the most frequent habitués of the Godebski's were two young,

very dark men in the early thirties, both full of gestures, both with a ready flow of talk, easy laughter, and a laborious attempt at the Parisian *blague*. One looked like an eighteenth-century *abbé* in disguise, with his Roman nose, piercing eyes, and the most beautiful white hands—this was Maurice Ravel; the other had the well-advertised face of a *gavroche* and the twittering of a sparrow—this was Pierre Bonnard. They were struggling young artists, Ravel keeping himself and his mother by giving lessons of music; Bonnard by occasionally selling a picture for a few francs. Both then entirely unknown, they were later to achieve great fame: Ravel as one of the greatest composers of our time, and Bonnard as a magnificent master of colour. Together with them I often met painters like Vuillard, Laprade, Valloton, all of whom rank now among the greatest, and musicians like the incomparable pianist Ricardo Viñez, the Pantagruelique composer, Claude Terrasse, the angular Florent Schmitt, the provençal Deodat de Severac, and later on Eric Satie, Poulenc and many others.

Among the writers my greatest friend was Léon Paul Fargue, always in love, always reciting poetry, the indefatigable *noctambule*, whom I used to

meet in the early mornings around the *Capitole,* the *Grillon, Lajunie* or other places of Montmartre, then at its gayest. Not a rare visitor was Charles Louis Philippe, looking like a monstrous gnome and talking like an angel, and the old Elémir Bourges who spent thirty years writing three novels, and finally Jean G.-Aubry, with whom I wrote some articles on Poland in the *Revue de Paris,* and who years later became an intimate friend of the Conrads and his literary executor. Arnold Bennett, as I mentioned, also became a great friend of the family, and kept in close touch with them until his death.

My *café* at that time used to be the famous *Café Vachette* on the corner of boulevard St-Michel and Rue des Écoles, which, alas, disappeared in 1914. The pride and central figure of the establishment was Jean Moréas, the most classic of French poets of modern times. Dressed with easy, Bohemian elegance, he and Conrad were the only non-English men who knew how to wear a monocle. When seeing me he used to bellow a quotation from Ronsard: *"La Pologne que Mars et l'Hiver accompagne,"* and sitting himself among his cronies was given to reciting poetry, mostly classical. Here used to come Ricciotto

Canudo, a pre-futurist poet, who fell during the War leading a battalion of Italian volunteers (before the Italian entry into the War). Here came Etienne Rey and Giraudoux. Here I made the acquaintance of Bernard Grasset, who started his great publishing firm on a thousand francs loaned to him by his uncle, Professor Grasset. In fact, his first publication was a book of mine *Le Conte Fantastique dans le Romantisme Français*, which, I am sorry to say, did not bring him great profit nor me great glory. Here I introduced him to Alphonse de Chateaubriant, whose first novel *Monsieur de Lourdines*, printed by him, brought both money and prosperity. Here Edouard Goldstein, a Jewish country-fellow of mine, spent most of his spare time. After taking part in the last Polish insurrection of 1863 he escaped to France, where he formed a most marvellous collection of curiosities and art objects, which he offered to the city of Cracow a few years before the War. He decided to remain in Cracow as the keeper of the collection, but not being able to get used to the way they served him boiled beef in local restaurants he left the country again after a stay of some few months. Sometimes the *Café* was honoured by the visit of Paul Fort, "the prince of

poets," who reigned supreme at the *Closerie des Lilas* and was rather reluctant to visit those alien parts.

In other circumstances I also met André Gide, who had just published his *Nourritures terrestres* and was known only as yet among the most refined dilettanti. I worshipped his writings, and he was extremely kind to me. To him I submitted my only literary attempts, which he later returned corrected, with a marginal remark that I would never grow up to be a man of letters. He used to tell me strange stories about Oscar Wilde and Pierre Louys, and he it was who first showed me the delicate beauty of Francis Jammes' poetry and the energy of Claudel's dramas.

At the university my chief teacher was old Emile Faguet.

Thus my surroundings were mainly intellectual, entirely artistic and literary. Unless I made a sentimental excursion with my guardian into patriotism, I lived with the movement of art and the emotions of intellect. Often, of course, I was simply enjoying my youth!

The milieu in which I lived was in no way interested in politics. They were interested in human emotions and their expression. They were

sincere over life, and if they enjoyed *blague,* they abhorred sophistication. They were emotionally supersensitive, and tender to man's sorrows, for they did not yet know the cruelties which the War would bring.

Nothing can illustrate better this humanitarianism of my friends than an episode I lived through with Ravel.

At that time a notorious bandit leader called Liabœuf was caught, tried, and condemned to the scaffold. Of course in comparison with American gangsters of to-day, he was what a mouth-organ is to a machine-gun, but at that time he was the embodiment of whatever was criminal in France. But, after all, he was a man, a living creature, and whatever his sins had been, have men the right to take life from their fellow beings? That is how most of my friends looked then at the problem. None more than Ravel, whom I met the night before the execution of Liabœuf, on the boulevards, broken in spirit and perturbed to the innermost of his soul. He talked like a madman, and when finally I persuaded him to sit and rest in the *Napolitain* he broke down completely and began to weep like a child. . . . Alas, the War has passed since, and I wonder if the present generation will

even understand this humanism of their predecessors?

Thus I lived for several years of my youth among modern artists, the creators of contemporary French culture, being like one of themselves, and trying to write books on French literature and arts. They did not pass unobserved: Paul Valéry remarked once to me, that they reminded him of a *souvenir de plage,* adding *c'est plein de cocquilles* (*cocquille* being the technical French for misprint). Sometimes, but rarely, I feel consoled by receiving charming letters from authors, about whom I was the first one to write in praise, like for instance a letter from Jules Romains, whom I cherish even now. (I wonder if he remembers it?)

I was preparing myself to be an intellectual, but at the same time I was not forgetting the final object of my studies; namely, Polish international activity. I was studiously learning at the *Écoles des Sciences Politiques* and trying to get to know the intricacies of European politics.

Conrad at the same age had already finished with his carefree living in Marseilles, and found that the sea was his adventure.

After his wild voyages in quest of inspiration he found that the sea herself was his enchantress,

and her magic powers mastered him. He decided to become a sailor. This idea which he first felt in the Alps anchored itself in him till in his early twenties he threw away adventure for adventure's sake and took the sailor's career in earnest. In the Black Sea, being with his ship for several months, he decided that he was going to be the first Pole to become a famous mariner; not a dilettante but a professional sailor. And, in fact, in time he became the first Pole to hold a master's certificate and to command a British ship.

His mind was nothing but logical! He must be a good sailor, and was not the British Mercantile Marine the best in the world? He must learn his *métier* at its source—on British ships. It did not matter that he did not speak any English. He would master it. And right away, there in the Black Sea, near San Stephano, he began to learn English. He left Marseilles and his French friends, who could have secured him cushy jobs and easy living; he left the enticing Spanish and French girls, and as simple A.B. sailor before the mast he started his 400 days at sea, indispensable condition to compete for the master's certificate.

From now on he spent some twenty years at sea; first for two years he was roughing it as a sea-

man apprentice, and this experience could not have been too enticing, for he did not like to speak about it even when asked directly. Then he came for his examination to London, and I believe it was one of the first visits he ever paid to the town which later he loved so much. He enjoyed talking about his examination, and he described it often in his literary work, although the fact that his English then was not too good rather jarred on his nerves even in remembrance.

He got his mate's ticket almost instantly, and from then on he spent most of his life in the Far East, somewhere between the Red and the China Seas. Very rarely he used to return to Europe, generally for short periods of time, which he used to spend with Mme Poradowska, or with the Brunow's. Practically always on sailing ships, I believe he never served on a regular passenger boat. Finally he got infected with malaria germs, and was obliged to look for something else to do. His last command was on the river Congo aboard a steamboat, one of the very rare ones he commanded; but recurring bouts of malaria forced him to leave the sea and settle down in England.

He loved to talk about his sea life, but again he very seldom made himself the centre-piece of his

yarns, which dealt with anonymous landscapes, with brilliant colours, unforgotten sunsets. He preferred to describe the atmosphere of a place than the place itself, the complexion or the mentality of a man than his adventures. I do not think that he met many extraordinary personalities in his seafaring years; in fact, I am sure that the only outstanding characters he became acquainted with during his voyages were John Galsworthy whom he adored, and Roger Casement whom he despised. In fact, I remember when after his trial and his condemnation during the War somebody, I believe it was Fisher Unwin, the publisher, circulated an appeal for pardon and asked Conrad's signature, he refused it with vehemence, telling me at the time that he once shared a hut on the Congo with Casement, and that he ended by utterly disliking the man.

But he was always on the alert to listen to stories of men who did extraordinary things in far lands, and nobody interested him more than Brooke, the Rajah of Sarawak, who served as a kind of prototype to "Lord Jim," to "Linguard" and other heroes of his novels. Many years later he happened to meet the old Ranee, the famous "White Tuan's" daughter-in-law, at a lunch given by Sir Sydney

Colvin, to which he brought me also. I imagined that he would be intensely wrapped up in evoking the past and in discussing the future of the countries with which he was associated for such a long time, and that he would show a particular interest in the daughter-in-law of his hero. I was disappointed. Polite and courteous as he was to the most charming lady, he soon fell into talk with Hugh Walpole, his ardent admirer, who also was present.

In fact, judging by his conversation, I suppose he loved the sea as a peasant loves his land, because it is his, because it belongs to him and he belongs to it, because it is so changing and always the same. But I do not think that while he lived on the sea he cared much for its by-products: men, adventures, opportunities to see things, chances of advancing his future, etc.

Not once but often he told me about his tremendous boredom at sea, when for months and months he had no congenial company, no books to read, no subject over which to meditate.

This boredom made him try his hand at writing. And boredom created one of the greatest authors of our times.

During all those years, despite the fact that his

habitual language was English, notwithstanding that he associated practically entirely with Britishers, he seldom visited this country, which he knew only imperfectly, until he settled down in England. In fact, where else could he have settled? His uncle Bobrowski had died by then; all his friends were here; most of his acquaintances, and he had to make his living.

So finally—chance or destiny—he anchored in England.

CHAPTER THREE



Arnold Bennett

AN INTERLUDE

BUT I do not think it was chance only. As it was obvious for the Poles during the nineteenth century to go to France, so it was unusual for them to visit England, a country which was not *á la mode*, whose language was very seldom taught in Poland, and with which there were no political connections. But in the breast of every young

man in Poland there was always the longing to know England not only as a geographical notion but as a living body. Yet it was not England, the Empire, not the wealth of the greatest trading people we desired to know; we did not care about English comfort, or English sporting achievements, for which we hankered little, not even English civilization—because we thought ours as good. What we admired was the silent, the discreet, but passionate loyalty to the country, which we felt composed the inner make-up of the Englishman. It was their sense of duty, their probity which appealed to us, their carriage of gentlemen, their cool blood and good manners in adversity, and at the same time the mysterious spirit which was in them, which carried them around the globe, which made them conquer one-fourth of it without knowing what it was all about. We loved them for worshipping pirates like Hawkins or Drake, and prim and insufferable saints like Wilberforce and Miss Nightingale.

For me and my contemporaries there was the England of Kipling, with *Kim* and his *Soldiers Three*. But Conrad missed Kipling entirely, since the latter started writing much after Conrad began to be impregnated with English spirit. In

fact, Conrad never understood the great Imperialist, and, indeed, disliked him intensely.

Most of all we were attracted by the mirror of the English Sea, always smooth and always changing, of the sea which for a long time has been an attribute of England just as England is a complement to the sea. (In these preceding lines I am trying to render my first emotions a long time ago, when I came into contact with England. Perhaps I would characterize England differently now.)

When a child I was taught English by a Bristol man, who had come to Poland forty years before and never learned Polish, but, to make up the deficiency, succeeded after twenty years of self-instruction in acquiring the Japanese language well enough to write letters in Japanese. However, I got an inkling of English literature, I knew what Burne-Jones or Ruskin represented, but in general I was less acquainted with English things than with French, German, or even Italian. In fact, I was entirely, so to speak, ignorant of contemporary English civilization, its manners, divisions, and successes, until I met Arnold Bennett.

At that time he had not yet achieved fame. He was practically unknown, having published but

few books, and rather mediocre ones at that. He was completing *The Old Wives' Tale,* the first novel which brought him universal recognition.

He was about forty years of age, the typical figure of an Englishman, not especially conspicuous in England itself, but often observed on the Continent, particularly on the pages of comic papers.

His teeth were still prominent (later on he had them replaced by a magnificent, almost classical, set); his manner of dressing used to be ostentatiously English; his pronunciation of French, although fluent, was marked by a palpable English accent.

As he was typically English in his make-up, so was his wife Marguerite typically French, of the provincial *petit bourgeois* class. Dark haired, not without charm or prettiness, her whole interest in life centred around her husband and her housekeeping. She had only one hobby and it was the art of declamation. Her intense devotion to her husband amounted almost to an obsession, a devouring passion, which certainly did not help to make the disinterested onlookers comfortable. Nevertheless, Bennett seemed to thrive on this

worship, for he made Marguerite his inseparable companion, and with a complacent mien accepted her *petits soins.*

This connubial bliss lasted for a long time. Only after they had been married about twenty years, some time after the War and their final migration to England (before they had lived on the Continent, mostly in France), one evening Bennett went out for a stroll—and never returned.

On the following morning Marguerite received a communication from his solicitors, asking her to vacate the premises and her husband's apartment. From that hour she never set eyes on him again. He settled quite a comfortable income on her.

Be it as it may, during those years when I knew them in France they were a model couple. They went everywhere together, and whenever they were in Paris they could be found with the Godebski's, running around to shows, art exhibitions, or concerts.

Bennett discoursed on literature, art, and music, and his wife's eyes followed him with doting affection. Occasionally he would say: "Have you ever heard Marguerite reciting poetry?" Politely we would deny the charge; unselfishly we would

add: "Let us hear it." Mrs Bennett would throw herself into a suitable pose, and off she went.



Poe's "The Raven" was her *pièce de résistance*. Ever since, I have hated this piece of poetry, which to my mind identified itself with *The Maiden's Prayer*, the piano-learning girl's revenge on flat-dwellers of the pre-War period.

As an artist Arnold Bennett was the direct antithesis of Joseph Conrad. Authorship was always for him an avocation, for which he prepared

himself carefully. Even when, in conformity with his father's wishes, he became a solicitor's clerk, he did not lose sight of his aim and in his spare moments learned how to master the art of writing. As soon as he could, he left the "Five Towns," and came to London with his first novel *The Man from the North*, and made a start in journalism—but journalism considered only as a preparation for literary writing. In time, by working as a newspaperman, he not only achieved financial independence, but mastered all the tricks of the *métier* of a professional writer, through application, hard work, and patience. He was certainly the most proficient writer I ever knew or even heard of. He wrote like a workman works in a factory, with the same kind of pedantic, methodical system, which permits the serial production in modern industry. In opposition to the great majority of writers, he was not in the least temperamental, his nerves and moods never affected his writing, nor did his environment, the change of the seasons, or the temperature of the room. Indeed, his system of working was unique in the sense that he was able to state to a certainty when he would embark on a new novel and when he would conclude it, and also to gauge to how

many words it would run. Before starting a new book he would say: "I shall begin it on—let us say—July 1st, and I shall finish it on November 26th," and his forecast was always right.

His way of working was so methodical, especially when he was staying in the seclusion of Valvins, near Fontainebleau, or later in his beautiful country house in Thorpe-le-Soken, near Colchester, that he never overran his appointed hour of toil, and when the moment for repose arrived he ceased to write even if in the middle of a sentence. Back at his desk he would take up the thread of interrupted period without the slightest pause for reflection.

His writings present another unique sight. He planned out his literary matter with such precision that his MSS were free from erasures and errors of any kind. He wrote a beautiful hand (he never used a typewriter for his scripts) and took special delight in illuminating ornately the initial letters of each important chapter or paragraph. As a result of this accuracy and those decorations, they looked more like codices written centuries ago by the sacred devotion and labour of a Benedictine monk than modern twentieth-century scripts.

With all the pedantry in his *métier* Bennett was

a modest, straightforward writer, fully conscious, on the one hand, of his shortcomings and, on the other, of the greatness of others. Thus, for example, after reading Conrad's *Chance* he noted in his *Diary* that it depressed him to read such masterpieces, for how should he ever attain Conrad's standard? On the other hand he never minded writing popular thrillers and melodramas for the sake of money alone, perfectly conscious of their artistic ineptitude. Out of the fifty books which he wrote some twenty were only conceived to that end, and most of his work as a playwright may also be placed in the same category.

There were many such contradictions in Bennett's life. An incurable Bohemian, ever wandering the world over, yet after his father's death, he never failed for years to write every day to his mother. In spite of his cult for French art and literature, his books were impregnated with English particularism, and he always remained insular in character and workmanship. When abroad fully appreciative of the cuisine of the Vatels' and Carêmes', in his native land he was faithful to underdone beef, cold mutton, and suet pudding.

The strange dualism of his mind manifested itself in yet another way. Intensely methodical

and pedantic, as only unemotional people can be, he was nevertheless endowed with an intense and sharp feeling of appreciation for all the arts. Exceptionally sensitive to music, he would at the Godebski's listen for hours with a rapturous expression on his face to the interminable piano-playing of Ravel trying out his new compositions, although the great composer was far from being a brilliant virtuoso. I am not myself a great connoisseur of music, but I remember all my musician friends of those days agreeing in praising to the sky Bennett's sensibility, good ear, relentless memory, and marvellous judgment in musical matters. Ravel, Stravinsky, or Schmitt loved to play to him and eagerly sought his opinion of their newly composed works.

He had no mean talent for painting, and I have seen several of his water-colours which have been much above the average amateur work, showing the subtle influence of Pierre Bonnard and even more perhaps of Vuillard.

Taking into account this real feeling for art and considering both his knowledge of *métier* and the tremendous amount of self-criticism, it is not to be wondered at that he achieved his goal, and that he created several novels which place him among

the greatest novelists of England and a worthy successor of the Defoes and Smolletts.

Like Balzac in his early days, he wrote indiscriminately novels, short stories, essays, feature articles, etc.; like Balzac at first failing to arouse the enthusiasm of his publishers, of the public, of his friends, or even of himself. However, he soon became aware of his talent for writing thrillers appealing to the masses, and even his early works of this type such as *Buried Alive* brought him considerable profits.

As I mentioned above, towards the end of the summer I met him he had written *The Old Wives' Tale.* At the outset it had no success, although connoisseurs immediately recognized the literary value of the book, and it was not till later, when Bennett became famous, that it began to be read by a wider public; but even then it was less appreciated than his "fantasias," which run through innumerable editions.

In 1913 Bennett hit on an even more lucrative way of earning money—playwriting. By then, it is true, he had already published two plays, but he had not yet mastered the tricks, and they had no success.

At last Edward Knoblock approached him with

a proposal of collaboration. A man with outstanding flair and knowledge of the stage combined with a great talent for technicalities of acting, Knoblock was often entrusted with "doctoring" plays, which, apparently good, were nevertheless by some invisible flaws prevented from achieving popular vogue. He rewrote a line here, enlivened the dialogue there, and his magic touch never failed in making a triumphant hit out of a flop. Lacking imagination, he seldom wrote a play himself, mostly adapting plays from novels or collaborating with novelists not acquainted with theatrical technique.

The result of this partnership was *Milestones*, from the start an outstanding phenomenal success in England and, within the last twenty years, equalled only by *Romance* and *Abie's Irish Rose*. Bennett told me himself that during the first ten years the play ran to over four thousand performances, of which over twelve hundred took place in London.

He invited me with my wife to the five-hundredth performance (as he duly notes in his *Diary*) just before the outbreak of the War, and I was able to observe the sustained enthusiasm of the audience. The financial profit which de-

rived from this play, and from the next one, *The Great Adventure,* even more successful, amounted (again according to himself) to more than £40,-000 per annum during several years.

Bennett was not spoiled by this influx of gold. He played with it as a child with a new toy. With an almost childish pleasure he bought dozens of gold and platinum cigarette cases, purchased a yacht and motor cars, showered fantastic and costly gifts on his friends; in short, lived as if he had broken the bank in Monte Carlo. Later he described this spending game in *Mr Prohack.*

. . . .

Such was the man who introduced me to Conrad and to the English writers who at that time were shaping English prose.

CHAPTER FOUR



Conrad at Home

IN 1909 when I was to meet Conrad for the first time he was practically unknown to the public at large. Beyond a few occasional articles in select publications, never a word about him appeared in the Press, and the man in the street did not even know his name.

He was so little known that I had never come across any likeness of him. That is why, when I received a telegram from him asking me to come down to his place in Kent, as the train was ap-

proaching Hamstreet Station, where he was to meet me, I wondered how I should know him—I need not have worried.

Hamstreet is a tiny station. When the train stopped at the platform it was deserted but for a few passengers, natives returning home. The station-master, as is usual in such places, was at the same time ticket collector, porter, etc., and except for him Conrad appeared to be the only person waiting on the platform. But I should have recognized him had there been a crowd. He was so unmistakably Polish, even to his old-fashioned sort of brown greatcoat, like the one my father used to wear when I was a child. He seemed, indeed, a typical Polish landowner from the Ukraine. A Polish essayist once described him as a "sturdy oak," and he has been spoken of as a typical "retired seaman"; to me he was simply a Pole from the Polish borderlands.

A trifle too short in build, he was over-broad of shoulders. His head was powerfully sculptured in rough, sharp contours framed with unruly hair and a strong, wiry, but short beard. His nose, almost aquiline, was somewhat broadly, one might say carelessly, carved. His eyes, grey-brown and clear, slightly watering in a strong light, were

underlined by wrinkles, which under his right eye had become veritable furrows from supporting a stiff monocle. In repose his face was serene but sombre, but sometimes it could light up with a gentle smile or become sullen with anger.

I went straight up to him, and he greeted me in Polish in what surely must have been the most drawling, singing voice that ever came out of the Ukraine.

It was a chilly day and dusk was approaching. Conrad immediately conducted me to his car, an ancient Cadillac—I had never seen a more antiquated vehicle. The starting handle was on the left side of the motor and evidently hard to operate. At first Conrad failed ignominiously, lost his temper in his excitement, and swore furiously in three languages. At last, however, we got off and his anger swiftly evaporated. He began to talk with animation, his speech being liberally interspersed with French and English words. And it was ever to be so. He never kept a conversation with me in one language only. When he started liking me, and when he got to know me intimately, he would open with "My dear Joseph" in Polish and then continue in English or French according to his mood of the moment. His Polish, gram-

matically perfect with an amazingly rich vocabulary, had still the intonation of the district of Poland to which he belonged, and which he had not revisited since he was a child forty years before.

He always threw himself into conversation with the utmost abandon, and on this occasion he became so engrossed in what he was saying that he forgot completely, and with alarming results, that he was driving a car! Later I learned that his family considered him the worst and most absent-minded driver on the road, and that his wife was in a continuous state of panic when she was in the car with him as chauffeur. His carelessness always got the better of him; he would let go the steering wheel and—the ditch. It happened so often that his friends finally persuaded him to give up driving altogether.

That evening, however, we managed eventually to reach, without serious mishap, Capel House, where he had been living for several years.

Capel House was a typical ancient farmhouse of which there are many in Kent. It was pleasant enough as a residence, while not remarkable for any outstanding characteristics. A small house, which in the course of time grew into a much

larger one, it shared the fate of many old country houses. From a diminutive hall one passed directly into the dining-room, one wall of which was almost entirely occupied by an old-fashioned fire-place, in which a vast heap of small dried twigs waited for dinner to be lit into a most entertaining, crackling fire. From there one passed into the drawing-room, which served as Conrad's study. This was a well-shaped, large room, well lit and cheerful, the walls hung with a few pictures, among them a small bluish reproduction of Hunt's *Hope* (although Conrad disliked the pre-Raphaelites), several old faded photos representing his father and mother, his uncle Bobrowski and others; there was also a portrait-drawing of himself by Rothenstein, a marvellous likeness and a bad work of art. A piano stood there on which his wife used sometimes to play, and by the window his large desk. Opposite a fire-place a comfortable couch, with a side-table on which, as soon as dinner was over, his wife used to place a bottle of whisky, a siphon, biscuits and cheese. In every spare inch of space, in the drawing-room as well as all over the house, there were shelves with books. Besides those two rooms on the ground floor, there

was the boys' playroom, the servants' room, and an enormous kitchen and pantry—for food played an important part in this household.

Immediately on my arrival dinner was served and I was introduced to the various members of the family.

Conrad's wife, Jessie, was without exception the best and most perfect woman I have ever had the good fortune to know. As is generally known, she was involved in an unfortunate accident which made her lame for life. She was run over by a cab which broke her leg in the knee in such an unlucky spot that it necessitated frequent operations. In fact, until she died she suffered intense pain and discomfort, having an always open wound in her knee, which limited her activities and for months at a time obliged her to use crutches or at least a solid stick. This enforced lack of movement had induced a heaviness of stature not at all in keeping with her active temperament. As the pains in her knee increased when she was sitting down, she usually stood up without a movement, leaning on her stick, and would thus hold long conversations, discussing all topics, especially London and that society from which she was debarred by her infirmity. But

mostly she would talk about Conrad and her sons.

She radiated unusual charm and loveliness. Her blue-green eyes shone with a tender far-seeing vision, while a kindly smile was always lighting up her face. She was not intellectual, but hers was that wisdom of quiet, unassumed, penetrating judgment of people and situations, the well-balanced poise of mind, which is found among old and very honourable people. But she was very young in spirit, interested in everybody and in everything, and enjoyed listening to narratives of strange adventures, which could often be heard in a house of which Conrad was the host. Her manner was controlled and restful, her good mood never deserted her, and her advice was always of the best. I never knew her people, good middle-class family from Birmingham or Manchester, although I heard her several times mentioning her younger brother who at the time was in the Civil Service in Mombasa.

To Conrad himself she was wife, mother, and guardian, besides being his secretary and assistant in his work. Up till a few years before his death she copied all his manuscripts. She also nursed him devotedly during the frequent illnesses of which he was a victim.

He had contracted acute malaria (paludism) in the Congo, which in fact was the chief reason why he was obliged to give up his sailor's trade and retire to dry land. The attacks were not frequent when I knew him, but I remember them telling me that during the first few years of their married life they were almost continuous. Poor Jessie, without a good servant—they were rather hard up at this time—not understanding his mutterings in Polish while in fever, herself in pain with her knee, proved to be the best of nurses and the most patient.

This patience was especially put on trial when Conrad suffered from gout, which was the curse of his life. Owing to the swelling of his feet, Conrad was often compelled to keep his bed for weeks and weeks. Already exceedingly high-strung and of a nervous disposition, the inaction and pain produced in him a state of intense irritation. During those crises his wife alone knew how to tend him, and he could bear no one else near him. He constantly indulged in new treatments, some of them most unexpected. Marwood, or maybe somebody else, told him once about the old-fashioned mode of carrying raw potatoes on his person, with the idea that they would collect

all the poisonous fluid accumulated in his body. Conrad maintained for a long time that the remedy was really efficacious.

Jessie was an exceptionally good cook. Did she not publish a book of cookery recipes? Anyway, one of Conrad's idiosyncrasies was that he would not eat any food at home but that prepared by her. Hence Jessie was always obliged to attend personally in the kitchen, even when servants were plentiful in the house, and she could have spent her time better. Though I am not quite certain that she *always* took a hand in cooking. The essential point was not to let him know that the housekeeper Mrs Morgan was responsible for it, for like a spoilt child, he would as soon as not declare it uneatable.

Conrad, although at times unmanageable in his behaviour towards her, was nevertheless devotedly attached to his wife. He rarely left her alone; she was his companion on all his travels, even on most of his short trips to London, and when once during the War he was absent for a fortnight or so inspecting "Q" ships at the invitation of the Admiralty, he wrote to her every day. In moments of tenderness he used to call her *"Chica,"* which in Spanish means "little girl," probably recall-

ing his adventurous youth in Spain and Mexico.

Conrad's wife was not interested in intellectual pursuits, and the fact that he was an artist and a great writer did not mean anything in her love and tenderness for him. He was her lover, her husband, the father of her sons, and that was enough for her. She would not have been different had he been a junior clerk or a shopkeeper. She treated him just as a beloved human being, rather queer, who had to be taken care of. And this was the luckiest thing for Conrad, because a man of his nervous temperament, his irritability, his lack of practical sense, would never have been able to produce the work he did had it not been for the devoted co-operation of his wife and her constant maternal care of him. Therefore all admirers of Conrad, who have a devotion for him, must needs dedicate also a shrine to the memory of his wife, as saintly a woman as there ever has been.

Jessie managed her household to perfection, never raising her voice, and almost, it seemed, without giving explicit orders. Everything went smoothly, and her guests were not only perfectly served but were flattered by special attentions to their little foibles and peculiarities. She never

forgot the favourite dishes of her friends, and the ways they liked to have them served—and they



were there when she entertained them. Kindly to all Conrad's friends, she had her particular favourites. Percival Gibbons was one of them, Aubry another, and she honoured my wife in particular with a deep and sincere friendship.

Jessie was an excellent mother; her sons adored her and she directed their education in the same quiet unostentatious way that she did everything. Their father of course concerned himself but little with everyday routine, reserving his paternal authority for exceptional cases.

At the time of my first visit in Capel House his two sons were still children. Boris, the elder,

resembled his mother in looks but inherited his father's temperament. The younger, John, a delightful little chap, then six or seven years old, had a cheerful and happy disposition like his mother.

The household staff consisted of an elderly housekeeper, Mrs Morgan, a confidential maid, Nellie, a lad who did odd jobs and occasionally acted as a chauffeur, and, last but not least, an old dog, "Hadji," a mongrel setter, the younger boy John's inseparable companion and everybody's pet.

At Capel House dinner was served in the English way except that the master never carved himself. He disliked all domestic tasks, which were generally carried out by his wife.

Conrad kept to very regular hours for his meals, and was exceedingly annoyed when anybody, especially his children, were late in coming. While waiting for the dishes he would play nervously with his knives and forks. During the meals he would talk incessantly.

After dinner, which was usually a lengthy affair, the children went to their rooms, and Jessie, having prepared everything for her husband and his guests, retired to her bedroom about ten o'clock.

Then we settled down by the fireside in the

drawing-room and conversation started in earnest.

Conrad had no use for small talk, but always saw to it that a definite theme qualified the conversation. He cared little for politics and slightly despised politicians, thus demonstrating the indifference of an artist and a not uncertain lack of enthusiasm for the future of mankind. By descent a conservative belonging to the Polish gentry, by tradition a democrat, he was in reality at times almost Utopian in his ultra-conservative ideas; at others he professed an extreme, almost fanatical, radicalism. Sometimes he allowed a sickly sentimentalism to bias his appreciation of a situation, and the hammering of power out of ruthlessness and cruelty seemed to him an almost artistic achievement. He did not believe in the "white man's burden," but neither did he feel much sympathy with the under-dog.

Fundamentally, I suppose, he held that the main object of a State's policy is not so much the acquisition of unlimited power, but the insuring of happiness to the greater number of its citizens. He was an opponent of British Imperialism, and, if he was anything at all, he was what was known at that time a "Little Englander." He did not like Socialism—I suppose because sailors were

not Socialists in his time. Anyway, any kind of conversation on politics he used to close with the formula "*Il ne faut pas aller contre le courant des choses,*" the principle of which appealed to him by its Pythian ambiguity. Social problems were even of less interest to him, although he never ceased to repeat that the easiest solution could be found in what he called the French system of two children per family and in birth control. In foreign politics he had one horror—of Russia; and no definite ideas, unless good wishes for the independence of Poland.

Of course I am speaking now of his pre-War conversations. During the War the trend of his arguments changed radically.

But, in fact, he seldom talked politics or debated social questions. On the other hand he discussed freely on art and literature, but he shared my myopia to music. He liked to listen to narratives of personal adventures but rarely spoke of his own, unless it was of those connected with those days of his youth he spent in Poland.

Once I questioned him about the love affairs of his youth, which he must have had, and pointed out that in his writings the love motif played no fundamental part. Conrad assented with a sharp

nod—and thus the conversation always ended.

Unless he held very strong opinions on a subject—it was never politics, the Polish question excepted—he did not like to differ from his interlocutor, an effect of politeness and ennui. But if he did he would stand his ground, would get excitable to the point of rudeness.

What he liked most, however, was to talk about people. I do not mean gossip, because he was not a "nosey" person, but he liked to probe the psychology of people, known or even unknown to him, just as he liked best to read diaries and memoirs, infinitely more than fiction or history. I suppose as a student of English diaries he could have given points even to Lord Ponsonby. When I told him of some of my later political activities, meeting with important people, etc., he would ask for the slightest details, inflection of voice, mannerism of gesture, and then he would go over with me trying to define the springs which moved the inner life of, say, Lord Northcliffe or Aristide Briand.

He had the Slav love for long, intimate talk. And so we used to sit by the fire until two or three in the morning sipping whisky, which he always took with plain water, advising me never to take

soda, as it hardens arteries, and munching from time to time a biscuit with cheese.

Soon it became customary for me and my wife to spend my week-ends at Capel House. In fact, during the War I spent practically every week-end, whenever I was in this country, with him and his wife.

The procedure was always the same. We arrived on Saturday afternoon, and after dinner the ladies would retire, and he and I would spend half the night discussing every conceivable subject over our whisky and water.

On Sundays he emerged rather late from his room. His wife was occupied with domestic affairs, while I and my wife played with the boys. In the afternoon we usually went for a drive in the car, and he would talk at length about the Kentish landscape, which he preferred to any in the world, with its rolling hills and delicate design of the landscape—so reminiscent of Chinese drawings he would repeat. Or he would talk about his neighbours, having an un-English curiosity about them; or for some unknown reason he would be moody and sulk in silence.

In the evening the ritual of Saturday would be repeated.

CHAPTER FIVE



Conrad and His Friends

CONRAD when first I knew him had few intimate friends, and his visitors were comparatively rare. He was not easy to get on with. I was told that sometimes, while people were actually staying in his house, he would leave surreptitiously and return only when he ascertained that they had all left. I recollect also another typical incident. When Lord Northcliffe—at that time already the great power of the Press—called upon him one

day uninvited, Conrad sent out a curt message that "he was not at home."

He never had been a misanthrope, but one could hardly call him a very sociable person. He did not make friends easily, maybe because he did not look for them.

By temperament he certainly liked company, but the sailor's calling which he pursued until he reached middle age made him a solitary figure, more interested in the subtleties of his own mind or in men's psychological reactions than in themselves. His lonely childhood, the lack of congenial companionship during his growing years, his long voyages on tramps or cargo-boats, where he was surrounded with men who must have been his intellectual inferiors, all that accustomed him to live by himself. Add to this the fact that on account of his physical shortcomings, recurring malaria and gout, which kept him in bed for long periods, he was automatically prevented from seeing many people. Finally there were his wife's infirmities, which hampered her movements and made it impossible for her to take an active part in social life. All those things prevented him from mixing freely with many people, even if he had been so inclined.

Besides, to be frank, the English, at the beginning of the twentieth century, were not very hospitable to foreigners, especially to one who was not rich, who had indeed barely enough to live on, who was not covered with titles or glory, who was a bit of an eccentric, who spoke with a pronounced foreign accent, and who did not kowtow to their foibles.

Later, when fame came to him, everybody wanted to meet and lionize him, but at the time he first settled in England few, I suppose, were anxious to go out of their way to make the acquaintance of a retired sea-captain who lived in seclusion on his savings and the few pounds he earned by writing.

I remember him telling me that for a long time, apart from casual acquaintances, the only two men in England with whom he was on terms of intimacy were a gentleman of the name of Hope, who became a partner of his in some business venture in the City, and a German companion of his seafaring days.

Not having the outward mannerisms of a professional writer, indeed not being a professional writer until later, Conrad had little opportunity of meeting English men of letters, excepting Gals-

worthy, whom he had already met in the East. The truth is that he was never partial to the company of his confrères.

But even had he been, it would not have been easy for him to find in London an atmosphere of literary comradeship. For at the beginning of the twentieth century, in contrast to what existed in almost every other country, and flourished even in England while Dr Johnson was alive and in the era of Dickens and Thackeray, there was no easy group meeting-ground for authors and writers, who might thereby find an interest in each other's work, exchange ideas, discuss problems of their own calling and questions of general interest. This lack of cohesion and of *esprit de corps* among English writers of the beginning of the twentieth century is so much the more strange, inasmuch as England is the country *par excellence* of professional castes. But the clannish spirit of the military, legal, medical, and other existing English castes has its origin partly from the circumstance that its members come from the same stratum of society, while literature draws its followers from everywhere.

I suppose one of the chief reasons why prominent authors no longer form a social and intel-

lectual milieu in London is the fact that neither the British public nor even the critics differentiate enough between good writing and the 'trade' of writing. In England the market for reading-stuff is enormous, and since there are not many who can write or who have the urge to write because they have something to say, fiction writing has become a trade like any other. In the year 1913 six thousand novels were published in England, out of which there were no more than five per cent. or approximately three hundred with any literary merit, half of which in turn were too difficult to be understood by the uncultivated masses. The position of an artist is in authorship often usurped by mere workmen of letters. Sometimes these scribes strike a happy note which finds an echo in the taste of the crowd; one of their books achieves wide circulation and a best-seller is born. And when a novel which sells to millions of readers is not entirely devoid of artistic quality, when it contains controversial matter, succeeds in appealing to the lower instincts of the masses, and still keeps up appearances, when, too, the author happens to be a man with an intellectual bearing, has nice manners, a winning personality, or is perchance the son of a bishop or of a peer, his work will then per-

haps be reviewed by serious critics and discussed by the Press.

On the continent a distinction is made between a *littérateur* and a mass producer of printed matter. J. Lemaitre, the great French critic, writing about G. Ohnet, a notorious best-seller of his time, started his article with an apology to the public: "I have generally been writing about literature; to-day I am dealing with Georges Ohnet."

This used not to be so in England; for when I arrived in London at the beginning of the twentieth century there was not a single literary critic who made any clear distinction between Thomas Hardy and, say, Hall Caine, while the yellow press would discuss at length the novels of R. Hitchens or the Baroness Von Hutten, and would not even mention the name of Galsworthy or Joseph Conrad.

It is not to be wondered that a successful producer of best-sellers, seeing his name in profusion in the Press and earning good money, would often arrive at the conclusion that he really had a standing in literature. A few years ago I heard, for instance, a certain author seriously complaining that although he wrote regularly four novels per annum of a hundred thousand words each, and made

some hundred thousand dollars on them, he was less known than Rudyard Kipling with a smaller output and with lesser earning capacity.

Obviously it would be impossible to find a common ground where Meredith or Stevenson could meet on terms of equality with William Le Queux or Marion Crawford, inasmuch as there are a few dozen good novelists and thousands of scribes and manufacturers of thrillers.

It must be also observed that possibly never in history did stronger individualities appear among fiction writers than at the end of the nineteenth century. Many of them preferred to live far away from the metropolis: Hardy in Dorset, Galsworthy (at that time) in Devonshire, Bennett in France, George Moore in Ireland, Joyce in Paris, R. L. Stevenson in the South Seas, Cunninghame Graham in South America, etc., etc.

Abroad of course there are always two sorts of places where men of letters may meet: in a drawing-room of some society woman or at a *café*. Lady Cunard, Lady Asquith, and a few other hostesses artistically inclined, made intelligent attempts to create such *salon littéraires,* without great success however, since although they attracted painters and musicians, they could never induce

authors, apart from such isolated men as Hilaire Belloc or J. M. Barrie, to visit them regularly.

The only literary *café* which ever existed in London, so far as I could ascertain, was the *Royal*, which seemed to me to resemble a well-advertised *Bal Apache* of Montmartre, where curious visitors were many, and of the genuine *apache*—none. Anyway the *Café Royal* was rather the *rendez-vous* of impecunious foreigners and artistic snobs, with a sprinkling of sculptors and painters and, of course, newspapermen, but not a literary *café* in the Continental sense.

The recluse Conrad would not frequent such a place, neither would he mix with the Chelsea crowd and its pseudo-Bohemian inhabitants. He stayed mostly at home.

Before the War there were few *habitués* of his house. It was not the custom with the Conrads to invite many guests at the same time. For one thing Capel House contained only two guest-rooms, and it was too distant from London for visitors to come for the day only.

Of near neighbours there were, as far as I can remember, only two. To one of them, A. Marwood, his oldest friend, Conrad was deeply attached, and he was much grieved at his death.

Marwood was a retired business or professional man, sincerely devoted to Conrad's family, while Conrad not only had a very great and sincere affection for him, but also highly valued his opinion on all matters of practical interest as well as on his own literary work, although his friend was in no way connected with professional writing. He it was whom under different names Conrad represented in his novels as the narrator of stories.

Marwood lived at one of the Cinque Ports on the Kentish coast—at Hythe I think—and was therefore within easy distance of Capel House, where he often dropped in for lunch and a chat.

The Gibbons family also lived near by. Percival Gibbons was before the War a promising young novelist whose work was strongly influenced by Conrad. During hostilities he became a war-correspondent on the Russian front. When on leave in England he used to tell us most sanguinary stories about the horrors he had seen, and he spoke most critically of the Russian methods of conducting warfare and of their treatment of the civilian population. His wife Maisy was a beautiful, hazel-eyed brunette, and there were two little daughters of about John's age, who, according to the mood of the latter, were either his fiancées or

his slaves or even both at the same time. Conrad and Jessie were exceedingly fond of the Gibbons and often invited them to stay.

Before and during the early part of the War the most frequent visitor from London was Norman Douglas, at the time when I first met Conrad co-editor of the *English Review* and one of the very rare real Bohemians to be found in England. He had formerly been in the diplomatic service, secretary to the British Embassy in St Petersburg, but some affairs of an intimate character unsettled him and ruined his official career. Perhaps I am wrong, but when talking to him it always seemed to me that life was but an empty shell to this extraordinary man, and that he plunged into literature out of boredom and disappointment. Perhaps, unfortunately for himself, he was endowed with a magnificent talent, a rare literary taste, an exceptional memory, and great personal charm. Received everywhere with friendship and appreciation, he first won fame as a brilliant critic and essayist, and later as a novelist. But a ruthless fate pursued him. Again involved in emotional entanglements rarely forgiven in England, he felt obliged to leave the country. Afterwards he resided abroad, where he wrote the most exquisite



prose of our times, in which may be discerned a faint influence of *The Mirror of the Sea.*

Conrad for a long time seemed to think much of him, valuing his opinions on literary things above all others, and attaching great importance to his early attempts at writing. He loved to listen to his gossip and witty remarks. Later however, in 1916, there came a sudden breach between them, and the friendship stopped.

It must be admitted that Conrad was a somewhat capricious friend. Just as happened with Douglas, he would, after long years of cordial relationship, for some unconnected reason, even for a trifle, brutally, unexpectedly bring it to an end. Generally speaking, however, his romantic, Slav temperament basked in friendship, he loved to be surrounded with friendly admiration, to feel that he was warmly admired. Hence he often patiently endured the society of people who otherwise did not mean much to him.

I wonder if Hueffer (as he was known at that time) belonged to that category? Son of a well-known German physician, on the maternal side a grandson of Maddox Ford, the famous pre-Raphaelite painter, he founded the *English Review* and filled in London the rôle which Voltaire once ascribed to Fréron. Everywhere where art and literature were discussed his blonde, pale face might have been observed. He was an expert adapter of the opinions of his friends, whom he knew how to choose. He soon sensed the genius of Conrad, and, a real connoisseur, even when the latter was still unknown, lauded him to the skies. Conrad's susceptible nature reacted easily to this homage and sincere flattery, and Hueffer became

an intimate visitor at his house, collaborating with him in *Romance* and one or two other stories. According to what Conrad told me, it was he who was responsible for the writing of *Some Reminiscences* (the title of which was later changed to *My Personal Record*). He dragged the opening chapters from Conrad, while he was lying in bed with gout, and Hueffer wrote parts of it to the latter's dictation. Without having any tender feelings for him, Conrad felt obliged and grateful for his services and constant admiration.

About 1914 Hueffer ceded the editorship of the *English Review* to Austin Harrison, and during the War he became a champion of British jingoism. He changed his last name to Ford in order to obliterate entirely all traces of his German descent.

The history of the *English Review* of old was remarkable. The first two editors brought it to a very high standard. It became the vanguard of literary and political movements; it obtained a reasonable circulation and the respect of enlightened people. Its rôle, seldom remembered now, was similar to that of the *Révue Blanche* of Paris some ten years earlier, grouping together all talented men of letters of England without distinc-

tion of political creeds or artistic allegiance. Later it passed into the hands of Sir Alfred Mond (Lord Melchett), who transformed it almost entirely into a political organ representing the views of his own group.

Another devoted friend and admirer of Conrad's was Richard Curle. Indeed, his ambition was to take on the rôle of Boswell to Conrad, and he wrote two books in which his affection for the host of Capel House and the admiration for his work is more evident than a critical exposition of the complex psychology of Conrad. He was Conrad's favourite among his younger friends, and I remember how he worried about Curle, when on account of his health the latter was obliged to spend a winter in South Africa.

Of course John Galsworthy, whom Conrad's sons called affectionately "Uncle Jack," was the great friend of the family. As I never met him either in Capel House or in Conrad's company, and as their friendship has been many times commented upon, I must rest with the simple mention of his name.

Nor did I often meet Edward Garnett, the great critic who first discovered Conrad's literary genius, when reader for Fisher Unwin, the publisher. He

also had the merit of having helped his wife Constance Garnett in incomparably translating the Russian novelists, of familiarizing Conrad with Turgueneff and Dostoyevsky, who played a rather important rôle in his literary evolution. Contrary to what has often been said, Conrad never learned Russian, and could understand it only through languages accessible to him: Polish, English, and French. Arthur Symons, the critic and essayist, is also to be counted among the intimates of Capel House, but when I began to frequent it he was already ill in an hospital.

A name often mentioned by the Conrads was Cunninghame Graham's, who had been one of the most striking personalities of contemporary English literature. Descendant of Scottish kings and, incidentally, one of the finest horsemen, he emulated Don Quixote as a wanderer in quest of adventure and as a chivalrous champion of the under-dog. He was especially interested in the Spanish countries of South America, which he had known intimately. According to Conrad, he reached the happiest moment in his life when during the War the British Government sent him to South America to buy horses for the army. He wrote several books, mostly narratives of his travels,

and even at the advanced age of eighty published a study of the Paraguayan dictators. His beautiful head, his roving spirit, his romantic make-up, all appealed to the adventurous mind of Conrad, who liked to tell colourful stories about his friend *The Don Quixote.*

Apart from casual visitors, the above-mentioned people formed more or less the circle of his friends up to the moment when Conrad achieved world-wide fame, which coincided approximately with the outbreak of the War. After his return from Poland, and during the War, his society became more international, with American and French people sometimes occupying the centre of the floor.

At his house, for example, I met Mr Walter Page, then Ambassador at the Court of St James, and a partner of the publishing firm Doubleday, Page & Co. of Garden City, New York. In time Conrad became quite intimate with the Doubledays, at whose invitation he went later to America, where he stayed with them. Conrad liked to acknowledge freely and generously the great debt of gratitude he owed them.

Among other notable Americans who visited him occasionally Warrington Dawson, the novelist, must be noted, as well as the pianist, Powell;

Joe Davidson, the sculptor, who made the well-known bust of Conrad, and two or three others whom I do not remember.

But taking it altogether, Conrad had no great liking for Americans. He used to say that the gulf dividing Americans and Europeans is more impassable than that between Europeans and Chinese. He admired the Chinese, whom he considered the most honest and most civilized people. He asserted that the Chinese, possessing an ancient culture, are closer to us than the new-rich Americans, to whom he denied all the subtleties of civilization, declaring that their place had been taken by a meddling curiosity.

Of course it is only just to add that Conrad's opinions changed radically after his first and only trip to the United States a short time before his death. The kind respect, hospitality, and charm of women and the frankness of men in America conquered him instantly, and notwithstanding the ill-health he suffered there he was enchanted with his visit.

At the time I am describing, however, his attitude towards Americans was pronouncedly cool, and he rarely invited them to his house. There was one exception, but a very important one; that

was Miss A., whom he calls Jane in his letters to his wife during the War. Brilliant and beautiful, she turned the heads of many conspicuous and famous men both in Europe and in her own country. Exceptionally gifted, a good newspaperwoman and a short-story writer of more than average talent, she had a marvellous capacity for listening and understanding. After she arrived in London in 1916, and until she left a year or so later, Conrad saw a lot of her. She became part-heroine in one of his last novels *The Arrow of Gold.* She was one of the very rare persons whom Jessie could not stand, as is shown in the latter's memoirs. She also, after the War, caused a certain estrangement between Conrad and myself.

Much as he disliked the Americans, equally he admired the French mentality, and loved to be in French company. It must be also remembered that the French were the first foreigners to acknowledge Conrad as a great writer. I recollect that even before my first visit to England in 1909, André Gide had already spoken to me about Conrad as one of the most gifted living novelists. He confirmed his high opinion of Conrad by making the trip to this country in 1912 for the sole purpose of meeting him. After spending a day in Capel

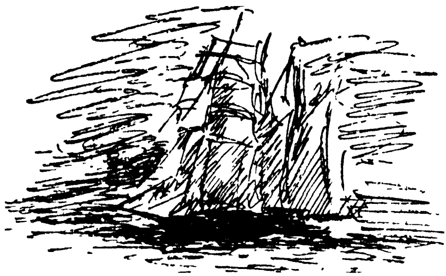
House he sent a magnificent Meccano set to little John, which for a long time was the joy of father and son. However, Conrad, touched as he was by Gide's attention, did not take to him, although they corresponded later, and Gide was instrumental in having some of his work published in French by the *Nouvelle Révue Française,* founded by Gallimard with money provided by him and his friends. Valery Larbaud, the jovial, stout author of *Fermina Marquez* and other subtle novels, also came once or twice to pay his respects to Conrad.

Yet another faithful worshipper of Conrad was Jean G.-Aubry, who for some years had been in almost daily contact with me in Paris. Aubry belongs to that old-fashioned school of French gentlemen of the epoch when France was a sanctuary for all suffering political persecution. He looked upon every victim of politics as a friend, and was always espousing every persecuted ideology. During the War, in 1915, when the fear of Russia and her Ambassador in Paris, M. Isvolsky, seemed to stop all signs of sympathy for the Polish ideals of freedom, he collaborated with me in writing a series of articles on the future independence of that country entitled *La Réalité Polonaise,* which

he followed with some enthusiastic articles signed by himself alone. Subsequently he made long sojourns in England where he met Conrad. At first he saw in him only a great and famous representative of Polish talent, and it was only later that he came to appreciate him as a mighty master of the pen. Conrad and his wife developed a great affection for the generous and gifted Frenchman, and with justice, for there was no more loyal friend and intelligent collaborator than Jean Aubry. Some of the best translations of Conrad's work into French were made by him. After Conrad's death he wrote his official biography and edited with greatest care some of his letters.

During all those years my wife and I were the only visitors of Polish origin at Capel House.

CHAPTER SIX



The Writing of Conrad

I OFTEN heard Conrad say that, although writing had been his sole occupation for the last twenty years, and that by it he had provided for himself and his family, and had moreover achieved high fame, yet he did not in his heart look upon it as the most important element in his life.

Indeed, when I first met him, when he was comparatively unknown, he once spoke almost disparagingly, almost with contempt of his literary activities—although perhaps this was due to a

passing ill-humour. "I write," he said, "simply and solely to earn my living, and I am not very successful at that. Had I remained in the Merchant Marine Service how different would it all have been. At any rate I should not be at the mercy of old Pinker, God bless him!"

Conrad thus, even after he had written *Lord Jim*, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, and *The Mirror of the Sea*, although retired from active service, still considered himself before all things a sailor. I must repeat it once more: nothing made him prouder than the fact that he was the only Pole in British service who, by his own individual effort and by sheer hard work, had risen from the ranks of an able seaman to that of a master, and that for years he had sailed the seas without serious mishap. Writing was for him a subsidiary business. He always—or almost always—maintained that writing gave him no pleasure whatever, that the creation of his novels was but pain and grief to him, and that he felt no inner urge to lay bare before the public his sentiments and thoughts.

When I reminded him of Flaubert, who experienced similar difficulties and pains in the labour of his art and yet felt always within himself a yearning for creation, for authorship, which made him

blind to all other pursuits in life, Conrad merely shrugged his broad shoulders impatiently.

How Conrad wrote his first novel is well known, since he described it himself at great length in his *Personal Record*. But it was for me, for a long time, a great riddle why he started imaginative writing at all. Nothing in his make-up seemed to destine him for a fiction writer, neither his past, nor his education, nor his ambition.

And whenever I questioned him as to his reasons for taking it up at all, in the most Conradesque manner I received every time a different answer. I am going to try to explain it here as I finally explained the mystery to myself, glossing over his answers, and taking into consideration all my talks with him on the subject, although I do not doubt that my point of view may provoke adverse criticism, especially among those who cling to the belief that a great writer, like a prophet of old, must be a God-inspired seer, a visionary, a *homo Domini*. But is not the greatest human quality to be human?

As often as not he would say that writing came to him by mere chance, as the result of sheer boredom. There was but little to occupy him on the sailing ships on which he spent the greater part of

his sailor's days, and which would sometimes drag three and four months between ports of call. Surely the life of a seaman must be one of the most inactive of all. If the weather be fine—and in the seas where Conrad roamed the weather is usually perfect for nine months in the year—a sailor, and still more a skipper, has little to do. The ship glides merrily over the water, gently propelled by the breeze, and even the man at the helm may lose himself occasionally in a nap. The arduous, wearisome, and heroic side of the picture is evident only in the periods of storms and hurricanes, but those rare intervals are of short duration.

And as it is with others, so it was with Conrad. The enforced idleness of long months on the high seas induces intemperance in some sailors; others develop religious mania; others take up some kind of serious study; Conrad turned to reading. While aboard he used to devour all kinds of reading matter he could lay hands on, and in consequence he never pursued any definite line, glorying in the promiscuity of his taste.

When, therefore, he had gone through all the books to be found, and was at a loss for occupation, he himself began to write without bothering

what to do with his writings. He wrote with no other thought in his mind, but only because he was lonely and bored. He wrote as other people play chess or solve cross-word puzzles. At the outset his writing was often erratic, haphazard, but as he continued it, perhaps because of the fortuitous encouragement of Galsworthy, more and more he became attached to it, until he wrote as a matter of course, having grown used to it.

Once settled on land he continued writing from necessity, for practical motives and later because he was piqued.

He wrote in English as a matter of course, because it was the language he had spoken for many years. It is a matter of conjecture what language he would have used had he been given the choice, if he had foreseen that what he wrote in those leisurely hours would be thought worthy of print, that it would bring him fame in the days to come, that it would have a market value, and that he would be obliged to keep on writing until death. I cannot help thinking it would have been French that he would have chosen as his medium—because, as he himself not unfrequently hinted, he was at first better acquainted with that tongue than with English; secondly, because he was

brought up on French literature, which he thought the most versatile, the most universal, and the most cosmopolitan of all. Thus a play which he and I once tried to write together was in that language, as Conrad wished to test the extent of his mastery in the use of French.

There was no dogmatism in Conrad's attitude towards his own work, which, indeed, had never been based on any abstract theory. Since he never frequented the society of professional writers, his manner of writing was unbiased by heterogenous influences, and not marred by inhibitions taken from some mannerisms of an exclusive literary school or coterie. He was eclectic by nature and *prénait son bien ou il le trouvait.*

His first and principal care was given to the structure and the technique of the novel or short story. By technique I do not merely mean the style and the main shape of the piece of writing he was preparing. I am thinking also of the architectural plan of the whole, the juxtaposition of the leading characters, the mixing of colours, the omissions and voluntary negligence, all that which the French call *métier*.

The *métier* interested him more than the plot or the inner meaning of the book—if there was an

inner meaning. When I asked him once which of his books he considered the best, he answered without hesitation: "*Nostromo* and *The Secret Agent* because in those I accumulated the most difficult technical obstacles and I overcame them most successfully."

Hence he would not worry unduly in search of a plot. Anything would do: a furtive reminiscence, an episode overheard, a rumour in the air. In fact, the body and the practical details of his narrative were accepted rather than chosen by him.

The *leit-motif* of his work consisted not in the plot, but in some kind of psychological equation. The finale of the story did not supply the climax of his book, and often its solution was given at the very outset. The old formula of an epic story—exposition, narrative, and solution—was not adhered to by him in the literal sense. It was transposed into the presentation of a psychological problem. In other words, the finale and climax of the plot (as in *Lord Jim* for example) appears at the very beginning, but it serves only as the exposition of a psychological case. Then comes the marshalling of facts leading to the psychological crisis, which in its turn is not rendered in an uninter-

rupted chronological sequence, but as it appears in relation to the psychological problem which Conrad has been testing for the enjoyment of the reader and for his own delectation. The answer to the psychological riddle comes at the end of the story, and by then the narration of mere events has been long ago concluded.

As a rule he describes the psychological evolution of individuals, but at times his analysis is devoted to a community, to a race, as for instance in *Nostromo.* Plot and subject once more become entangled and intermingled in order to compose a psychological symphony. He does not depict the conditions in Latin-American countries, but the psychology of the natives as influenced by the fiery heat of the sky, the languor of the tropics. He probes their nature, too indolent and too impulsive, their character too temperamental, and he analyses their reactions to generous ideas and sordid motives.

Once I persuaded Conrad to write a novel of the Napoleonic period, to be a kind of epic of Bonapartism viewed from the psychological angle. I did not then comprehend, I am sorry to say, Conrad's technique, and I did not understand how tantalizing the psychological problem had ever

been to him. The result of my suggestion was *The Rover*, where the Napoleonic background is of no great importance to the book, forming at most the stage to the psychological aspects of the principal personalities.

For the same reason love is seldom the leading subject of his novels. In a love story the plot is vital, while the psychological analysis of the characters of the lovers does not represent a practical problem to be solved with skill. That is why the crucial point of Conrad's stories is so often a point of honour, of loyalty, or, even better, the unexpected blow of fate. And so Conrad joins the immortal Greeks!

As a stylist he was no less a purist than Flaubert, but he did not regard the exact choice of words as intransigently as the author of *Salambô* nor was he as sensitive to the sound value of a phrase as the Frenchman. He maintained that phraseology must be controlled, economical, and restrained. An author should make use of a minimum of words (*vide* the precepts of Mme de Sevigné) and, above all things, avoid unnecessary adjectives.

Nothing, indeed, surprises us more than the wealth of Conrad's vocabulary, especially when

one remembers that he was eighteen when he heard English for the first time.

Before starting his literary career Conrad lived twenty years among seamen, proverbially terse in their speech, and moreover a large proportion of his companions were Dutch, German, or French, who even if they were acquainted with the English language could not possibly have excelled in it. They did, however, add spice to Conrad's own future mastery in the adaptation of English words to his imagination.

Combined with this instinctive gift, Conrad possessed a thorough knowledge of English idiom and an unusual flair for syntax. Sometimes, however, he has made use of expressions which, correct in themselves, have certain inflections which, if not alien, are at least strange to the conventions of the English language. It is not that they are *recherchés,* because the style of G. Meredith or O. Wilde sometimes seems to be almost a hot-house language in its elaborateness, but they are not quite within the psychological habit and tradition of an English-born person. Although Conrad's style is very idiomatic, yet one comes up against expressions which are wholly foreign, mostly Polish. I pointed a few out to him, and in particular

the following two which occur fairly frequently: "under the angle of eternity" and "civic valour." Conrad picked them up bodily from Polish. He



agreed with me, and later amused himself by selecting more of such phrases, remarking that he did it unconsciously, but adding the hope that their use might eventually enrich the language.

He never gauged to the full the harmonies of the English tongue. To use a familiar saying of Flaubert, his writings *ne dépassait pas le gueloir.*

His own pronunciation left much to be desired. He spoke English in the same way as his Polish castaway in *Amy Foster;* he spoke English with great fluency, but always with that singing, soft, and at the same time vibrating intonation that instilled a strangely penetrating power into the sound of the most familiar English words, as if they had been the words of an unearthly language. When nervous or irritated he spoke almost unintelligibly, to such a degree that even his nearest, although accustomed to it, found it difficult at times to understand him. When very ill and feverish, to the despair of Jessie, he spoke only Polish.

In parenthesis I would like to add that there is one feature in Conrad's art which is unique in English literature. Writers in this country when depicting Nature, the landscape and its phenomena, usually portray them in a static manner and seize the passing moments as if they were frozen into immobility. They give successive pictures as if a cinematographic ribbon were cut into separate stills. Wordsworth is a typical example of an author who, when describing events of Nature, renders them in successive immobile landscape paintings. Conrad, on the other hand, puts

movement into his words, and catches Nature in the act of changing from one mood into another.] When I commented on that to him and observed that this is a typically Polish verbal procedure he made no reply for a moment, then handed me some faded volume out of his library, saying: "Here is the reason." The book was *Pan Tadeusz*, the great Polish epic, written by the most glorious romantic poet of Poland, Adam Mickiewicz, which is, perhaps, unexcelled in any other literature in its descriptions of the elements of Nature. This book, as I mentioned before, had been one of the very few mementos of his country which he had not lost in his peregrinations, and which he never tired of re-reading.

. . . .

Whenever Conrad asserted that he wrote in order to make a living, he never omitted to add that he also aspired to be widely read. He considered that the first and foremost aim of an author consists in conquering the public and keeping it. He would not enshrine his art in an isolated chapel, or wrap it up in the slogan "art for art's sake" which had been so ardently and so universally upheld by the intellectual men of letters of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The

hermetic art of a Mallarmé or Paul Valéry was alien to him. He often used to say that an author has to write for his public and that an artist's chief objective is to secure popularity without losing caste or quality. He genuinely loved the mass of his readers, not in the supercilious, market-seeking way of a film star, but as a bard in the past may have loved his enraptured audience. Indeed, in opposition to the romantic and impressionist artists of the type of Oscar Wilde or Courbet, he trusted his public. He often asserted that every man who has talent must sooner or later achieve fame and public admiration. He thought that there must be merit in the most despised producers of thrillers, since they find a wide range of readers. He could be bitter when talking about some of his more snobbish confrères, but he would not look with scorn on unpretentious best-sellers like Marie Corelli or Wilkie Collins.

But although "writing to make a living," for many years he could not find a market. The sale of his first few novels did not exceed a thousand copies or so. *Lord Jim*, first published in 1906, by 1912 had not sold as many as five thousand. Even in 1913 he did not receive more than ten guineas for a short story published in a first-class maga-

zine like the old *Pall Mall* (later amalgamated with *Nash's*), while the same sum of ten guineas was paid to him by the German publishers B. Tauchnitz for the continental rights of one volume of his works. Yet the famous collector of manuscripts, Mr Quinn of New York, even then used to pay him surprising prices for his manuscripts.

As Conrad lost most of his inherited capital and his small savings either in his only business venture with Mr. Hope or else in a few unlucky investments, it had not been easy for him to make his living for many years before 1914. Many times I have heard him saying, that were it not for Pinker he would have starved. By advancing him money on his future work and success, Pinker not only proved to be a faithful friend and devoted admirer of Conrad's, but also a shrewd business man.

Conrad's wider popularity among the British reading public did not materialize until 1913, and it was brought about in two different ways. First *The New Age*, a progressive, literary weekly, magnificently edited by the unforgotten A. R. Orage, organized at that time amongst its readers a plebiscite to determine which had been the best book of fiction within recent years. An overwhelming

majority of votes was cast in favour of *Chance*, which had appeared a few months previously. *The New Age*, although its circulation, according to what I heard, did not exceed twenty thousand, exercised a considerable influence on British public opinion, and this choice aroused a widespread interest, followed by an intensive sale of Conrad's books. Conrad was finally taken up by the wider masses and his popularity had begun.

Almost at the same time the American public took notice of Conrad and started reading his sea novels voraciously, not without a great amount of preparatory propaganda organized by Doubleday, Page & Co., one of the most important publishing firms of New York.

Chance was the first novel which sold over five thousand copies in a year in Great Britain. *Victory* reached ten thousand, while his previous works began to be frequently reprinted. Before his death in 1924 he was not only recognized as one of the great masters of English prose, but he achieved real popularity, though of course not to be compared with the spectacular fame of Pamela Wynne or Zane Grey.

His gross receipts from the sale of his books in 1923 totalled about ten thousand pounds, and at

his death his successors received twenty thousand pounds of savings, accumulated within his last ten years. Incidentally this is the smallest fortune left by any of the great English novelists. Hall Caine, the wealthiest of them all, left £250,000, Sir James M. Barrie about £200,000, R. Kipling £150,000, Th. Hardy £91,000, J. Galsworthy £88,000, G. Moore £75,000, A. Bennett £68,000, G. K. Chesterton £28,000.

. . . .

In referring to his technique I said previously that Conrad preferred to anything else the overcoming of obstacles. In fact, the victorious fight against overwhelming odds was always his chief idea. Contrary to his family traditions, he left his country to become a master mariner, an ambition never before achieved by any of his fellow-countrymen. In this desire of Conrad to triumph over obstacles may be found an epitome of why he achieved greatness as an English writer. Since even to speak English had been a difficulty for him, he could not be content with writing an indifferent English, he must become an outstanding artist in prose.

In every case known to history a novelist—an epic writer is a better term to describe Conrad's

prodigious gift—is the product of the soil, formed by the tradition and nursed by the inspiration which passes from generation to generation, which forms the background to the childhood of each man in his own country. The greater the genius, the more he owes to his ancestral surroundings. Even Lord Byron, the most erratic of English poets, when an infant was lulled to sleep by English nursery rhymes, his thoughts were formed in the language of his English forefathers, he learned writing on English texts, and his mind was formed by the teachings of English masters. Revolutionary in his spiritual and emotional reactions, still he used the only medium he had ever known—the English tongue—and even in his most anti-traditional poems he was in line with his English heritage.

Conrad, alone among the great authors of the world, was not nurtured in the traditions of the idiom he wrote, and he was no kin to those who made the English language the most subtle, the most beautiful instrument of artistic enjoyment.

What is more, I am sure that as a young man he scarcely knew anything about the main facts of English literature or history. At the time he was

finishing school there were few English writers translated into Polish beside Byron, Shakespeare, Walter Scott, a few novels by Dickens, Thackeray, and Anthony Trollope. The novelists of the eighteenth century were then practically unknown in Poland. Only a few narratives of travellers and explorers like Captain Cook, Mungo Park, not to speak of Livingstone and Stanley, could be found on the shelves of Polish libraries.

Already then, however, especially among the younger generation, there was a strong feeling and desire to become acquainted with things English, which later on, at the beginning of the twentieth century, turned into a real Anglomania. Hence it is not impossible that Conrad could have read English books in French translations. However, he told me emphatically that a thorough knowledge of the chief works of English fiction came to him when he had those leisurely moments at sea.

Consequently his masters in literature were not English authors, but all the great novelists of the world, influencing him according either to their own merits or according to the receptibility of Conrad's mind. He became an English writer only in the sense that he wrote in English; his

literary allegiance goes to the universal fountain, his place is in European literature, overstepping the boundaries of purely English tradition.

Owing not less to the literary eclecticism of Conrad than to his capricious changes of mood, at times it was extremely difficult to ascertain which piece of writing he did hold in highest esteem, and which was the author he most preferred; hence it is almost impossible to point to those who had special influence over him, with the exception of the obvious ones, like Adam Mickiewicz, the above-mentioned great romantic poet of Poland, Dostoyevsky, Flaubert, and Balzac.

When discussing men of letters Conrad would praise such works as took his fancy at the moment. (Although I agree with many conclusions drawn by Mr. R. Curle in his books on Conrad, I do not share his views when it comes to his appreciation of Conrad's method of thinking, and his analysis of this latter psychology of creative work.) I use the words "at the moment" deliberately, and they are important, for he often took suddenly extreme and strange dislikes, his antipathy to an author, as likely as not, melting away quickly and for reasons as futile and transient as those which had first given rise to it. A man of stern principles

and straight lines in his private life, he despised weakness of character and the display of immorality. He disliked consequently the works of Oscar Wilde, because he had a profound contempt for his way of living.

The spirit of contrariness in him made him also dislike anyone who expressed himself in over-enthusiastic terms when talking about a writer or a book. This would instantly provoke in him an outburst of sarcastic and virulent criticism. Finally, his own changeability of mood formed also an element in the expression of his views on things. If he disliked his interlocutor, if, by chance, he suffered from gout, he would exaggerate when referring to literary matters.

In summing up my conversations with him on literature the following are the only indications which I would dare to give on his attitude towards literature and writers.

Among English novelists nearest to him stood the eighteenth-century writers, and foremost among them Smollett and Richardson. He made me read their novels repeatedly and never tired commenting on them. He was not as keen as one would expect either on Fielding, Goldsmith, or Jane Austen, all of them being too slow for him

in movement, and not particular enough in the choice of their subjects. He definitely disliked the Brontë sisters and could not stand *Wuthering Heights* on account, as he said, of the lack of restraint and the artificiality of the passions described. I well remember the scolding he gave me once when under the impression of a recent conversation with Gide, who thought this last work to be one of the masterpieces of the world, I began in his presence to praise it without measure.

His attitude towards Dickens was most peculiar and most Conradesque. He did not feel that love for him and that sentimental appreciation of his beauty which is universal among English people. He disliked the lack of structural cohesion in the works of the author of *David Copperfield*, his lazy habit of taking the line of least effort when confronted with technical difficulties, his happy-go-lucky mannerism in descriptive scenes. He was irritated by his moralizing tone and the unending preaching attitude. But he did not like to show too openly his negative attitude towards Dickens and run contrary to the universal English verdict, for he did not like to appear revolutionary. There was also a certain touch of snobbishness in his assumed English outlook on things; he feared,

maybe subconsciously, that if he did not pay at least lip-service to the author considered as the embodiment of all that is really and truly English, he would perhaps miss the point in his English make-up and, incidentally, become the target of adverse criticism as far as his own insight into the English mentality was concerned. He, moreover, ran the risk of being proclaimed a foreigner, ignorant and un-British, and not to be expected to absorb the true spirit of English letters.

Of the writers of the nineteenth century he had the highest respect for R. L. Stevenson, though he distrusted the smoothness of his style. He liked to listen to Sir Sydney Colvin's musings and discourse on the merits of his friend, the author of *New Arabian Nights*. Alien as he was to him in spirit, he admired Meredith, because of the latter's chief quality—the successful juggling with technical difficulties.

Among his contemporaries he praised Thomas Hardy and Henry James for the virility of their conceptions, the economy of their technique, the precision of their style. He felt a strong antipathy towards G. B. Shaw, and used to recall a cartoon by Max Beerbohm, showing the vegetarian playwright standing on his head in clown's garb.

Conrad thought him to be a mischievous jester who would not change with time.

He did not care for Rudyard Kipling, and he had the prejudice of many of his contemporaries against what they called Kipling's reporter's style and his "journalese."

The reciprocal attitude of the trio John Galsworthy, Arnold Bennett, and H. G. Wells towards Conrad is not without a particular savour. The three of them had an immense admiration for Conrad's genius and a personal liking for him. Conrad was, of course, devoted to Galsworthy, but avoided Wells both in person and in writing, and did not care at all for Bennett. He used to say jokingly to me that the latter was responsible for only one good thing, namely, in having been the intermediary who introduced me to Conrad. In no way did Conrad appreciate Bennett's best novels *Clayhanger* or *Elsie and the Child*. He admitted the merits of Wells's fantastic stories, but he deprecated his tendency to emphasize the moral at the expense of the artistic finish, and complained about his fondness of preaching at the expense of literary truth.

Galsworthy, of course, was his greatest friend, acting the elder brother towards him, encouraging

him in his literary efforts, and until his death giving him all the proofs of unselfish and admiring friendship. Conrad used to declare with emphasis that without Galsworthy's sympathy he would never have developed into an English author.

Apart from other personal feelings, Conrad regarded him as a most perfect type of the proverbial English gentleman. Very good-looking, very distinguished, with perfect manners, of an exceptional rectitude, Galsworthy had an understanding of foreign things quite uncommon in this country. I doubt, however, if Conrad really thought as highly of the literary merits of *The Man of Property* as the latter thought of Conrad's work. *The Forsyte Saga,* which had not been completed at the time of Conrad's death, seemed to him too grey, too monotonous, too matter of fact, too realistic. It conformed too much, according to Conrad, to Stendhal's definition of a novel: *un miroir qui se proméne sur la grande route.* It was Balzacian, without Balzac's exuberance and grandeur. *The Dark Flower,* however, he commended without reservation.

I could go on for hundreds of pages recalling Conrad's passing in review the activities and characters of many striking authors. Alas, space does

not permit me to write for my own pleasure about things which perhaps are not interesting to others, and I must conclude these reminiscences of Conrad's appreciation of his confrères by noting a few of his opinions on foreign men of letters.

At that time—I mean before his visit to America—he had not been well acquainted with American literature. He liked Walt Whitman, detested Mark Twain, and was only faintly amused at what he called the antics of O. Henry. Of the younger generation he appreciated J. Hergesheimer whose *Three Black Pennies* he sent me to read.

He was most deeply impressed by the Russian giants. He admired Turgueneff above all others and thought Dostoyevsky the greatest psychologist among novelists. He thought the beginning of *War and Peace* to be, technically, the best introduction to any book of fiction. Praising Chekhov above de Maupassant as a master of short stories, he did not like Gorki or Merejkowski. The first was too crude for him, while the latter he suspected of a savagery out of keeping with the subtlety of the choice of his subjects.

Among the French, Balzac seemed to him the most incomparable creator of life. Coldly he commended Anatole France, but surprisingly enough

admired P. Bourget. Sceptical about the preciousness of A. Gide, he deprecated the return to naturalism shown by Charles Louis Philippe or Colette. V. Larbaud was quite a favourite with him, while Claudel or Valéry (little known at that time) were too strong medicine for him.

He knew Polish literature but slightly, with the exception of a few novels he read in Zakopane in 1914, or after the War. They did not find favour with him, with the exception of the work of a young writer B. Winawer, whose *Book of Job* he translated spontaneously into English.



At Random

C*ONRAD and London.*—What attracted me most to Conrad—apart from the fact that he was a countryman of mine who had made good—was the traveller in him who had known the East intimately, and whose life and work was linked

with such places of fragrant melody as Surubaya, Sarawak, Hong-Kong, Celebes.

Very often I tried to draw him to talk about foreign parts, about strange places and men of different color and races. I succeeded very seldom. Instead he spoke about London, the modern Samarkand of the West and, after all is said, the spiritual center of Conrad himself. For curiously enough, with all his appreciation of Paris, he did not care for that city. For a great traveller the association of these two cities is self-imposing. Any one of us who has vagabonded around the world must, by fate, adopt one of the two: the feminine, magic, enchanting beauty of Paris, or the virile, energetic, massive appeal of London. Those who like brilliance, because there is not enough of it in them, those who bask in the quickness of wit, in inspired intelligence, because they are dull-witted themselves, all those must seek Paris for their background; those who value achievement, a dull and laborious success, converge towards London. For the obstinately romantic Conrad, London was the obvious place to worship.

And he loved to proclaim that whenever he was homesick, whenever he longed for a whiff of

Europe, he was thinking not of his native land, not of Marseilles, with its Cannébière, not of Paris—never of Paris—but only of those white cliffs of Dover, which suggested the road to London.

He discovered London rather late in life, and he never lived there for long. He loved to feel around him the atmosphere of London; he loved to come to town, wander around its streets, discovering new aspects of its beauty, always amazed at its energy, not seldom amused by its quaint vitality.

His visits were rare both on account of his and his wife's infirmities. At the time I met him he used to stay at the Norfolk Hotel, Norfolk Street, Strand, and later at the Curzon in Mayfair, an old-fashioned hotel, which disappeared some ten years ago.

He would arrive in town in the morning, go straight to Pinker's, and, if not prevented by indispensable errands, would roam around. Innumerable times I accompanied him on his walks and listened eagerly to his comments on London, biased by his unselfish devotion to the ugliest and most magnificent town in the modern world, and by his partiality to everything English.

His soliloquy on London pivoted around the

assertion, which I never heard from anybody else's lips, that in opposition to Paris, Rome, and other capitals, London's aspect is never the same, always fluid, always changing. The Forum stabilized for a thousand years the face of Rome of the Seven Hills, and St Peter's for another cycle impregnated the general character of the Papal City. Paris was built around the tower of Notre-Dame, within the shadow of the Louvre, along the eternal Seine. London has no landmarks of indelible quality, its river beautifies or mars its face according to the whims of its population; there is no gigantic pile of stones which subjects all other buildings to their rank and station, for even the Tower, or St Paul's, not to speak of Westminster Palace or St James', are either marginal, or ephemeral. London continuously changes its architecture, moves its centre, varies its pleasures.

"Look at the Strand," he used to tell me, "three times rebuilt and three times enlarged in my time." And he would narrate how first he saw it as a Georgian thoroughfare, compact and elegant, how it became a pompous, massive Victorian avenue, of which the old *Gatti's* was a fair example, how it acquired a light Chabanais aroma under Edward VII, with its stucco garlands and cherubs,

of which the still existing *Romano's* was the centre. Finally came what he called the *Lyons* architecture, with the Savoy and the Strand Palace.

And he would take me to Aldwych of Dickens or muse on the colonnade of the Regent Quadrant, partial as he was to Beau Nash' architectural arrangements. Or else in Fleet Street he would recall his early memories about his first stay in London (I faintly remember that he named Anderton's as the first hotel he stopped at) and his exams for his master's certificate which took place somewhere in the neighbourhood. He would take me to his favourite points of view: the Arch of the old County Fire Office in Piccadilly, regarding the Circus with the Parliament Tower in the background, or to the gate of Lincoln's Inn facing the Law Courts. He would talk about Wapping, Watling Street, and the spices of Mincing Lane.

S.S. Cadet-Ship "Worcester."—One day he took me to the "Worcester" where Boris was at school. Although Boris was not showing any inclination or aptitude for the sailoring profession, nor had his father ever thought about such a career for his son, he considered that a naval

school is the best for any boy, because it prepares him for practical emergencies, gives a lot of physical training, and develops mental agility by the extensive teaching of mathematics, which Conrad thought equipped one better for general thinking than dead languages or philosophic dialectics.

It was a memorable visit. Its commander Wilson-Barker was an old acquaintance of Conrad's from his sea-faring days and represented all that is typical in British sailors. We duly met him with his wife, a motherly lady, and were shown around the ship, moored somewhere off Gravesend. We were given tea and told interesting stories about the teaching system of the "Worcester," about former "Worcester" boys, among them Admiral Togo, the Tsushima victor. Togo attended the school as a grown man, but, as Japanese do in European eyes, passed for a boy without detection. Conrad commended highly the way Boris was growing up under the care of the Wilson-Barkers, and went into a lengthy dissertation on the superiority of nautical schools and the traditional educational system of the English.

James B. Pinker.—In these pages I mentioned several times the name of Conrad's literary agent

and friend J. B. Pinker, called by him affectionately "Pink." He was the first to establish in England the institution of literary agent, and before the War had been by far the most important. I think that, with the one exception of G. B. Shaw, every author of repute became sooner or later his client. Rosy-cheeked, jovial, Pinker had the attitude of a Dickensian bank manager, and his devoted honesty. Conrad dealt with him from the very beginning of his career and had reason to be grateful for numerous pecuniary advances on future publications. Conrad considered him as one of his surest friends and valued highly his practical advice. I think, however, that at the back of his affection for Pinker stood the latter's great hobby, unexpected in a shrewd business man—his love of horses, which, like one of the Forsytes, he used to drive whenever he had any time to spare.

Conrad's Polish Essence.—In all external physical characteristics Conrad was typically Polish—so were his reactions. Hospitable to a fault, quick-tempered, given to interminable discussions, *gourmet*, passionate, very hard-working, he had attachment to his country in a manner rarely

shared even by his fellow-countrymen, who during the nineteenth century brought flamboyant patriotism up to its apogee. Polish patriotism, if not in deeds, is always in words and gestures overbearing and enthusiastic, dynamic and active. Conrad's attachment to his country was objective, passive, and reticent.

We are used in Poland to patriotism which is centered around one definite spot. a village, a town, an ancestral estate. In fact, it is true for Englishmen as well, and I remember one middle-aged English reprobate, a cheap remittance man, a sot, a disgrace to his family, whom I met in Cuernavaca, a lovely, secluded place in Mexico, who dreamed about the Downs of Surrey, inquired about Chanctonbury Ring, and was quite worried when he heard that pylons conducting electrical wires were threatening the landscape of his youth. Conrad as an infant was carried away from his native Berdyczew; as a child he strayed from town to town, to spend the loneliness of his schooldays in Cracow. He could not and did not attach himself to any particular nook or corner of Poland. To him the description of the yellow cornfields of the Ukraine sounded like a fairy story, and the hills surrounding Cracow appeared in his memory

like so many landscapes, celebrated in poetry and painting. His patriotism lacked a physical pivot. He could not enjoy the most intimate kind of patriotism, the love of one's childhood surroundings, which sounds so pathetically in the writings of the great Polish romantic poets Mickiewicz and Slowacki.

Leaving his country, he did not leave behind any near relations except his uncle Bobrowski; he did not abandon a familiar hearth, or forsake an ancestral graveyard. When abroad he lived among strangers. His feelings for his country, instinctive and passive, were not often rekindled by meetings with countrymen he cared for.

The Chodzko's in Marseilles were frenchified, used to the French mode of living, engaged in pursuits they shared with any French citizen.

Mme Poradowska was of Belgian descent. The Brunow's and the Zagorski's he saw rarely, if ever.

Only in England he frequented a true and venerable patriot M. Kliszczewski, who used his Christian name "Spiridion" as a surname. He was of the type of the Biblical patriots, like those patriarchs exiled on the Euphrates. Established as a jeweller in Cardiff, he clung jealously to his

country, sending his children to Poland to be married, and he remained faithful all his life to his Polonism. Conrad respected him deeply, but saw him seldom.

He did not meet many Poles in his wanderings. In fact, I recall him quoting only two: an anonymous Polish sailor in "The Sailor's Home" in Saigon, who became *Yanko* in *Amy Foster*, and Count Joseph Szembek, whom he met somewhere in Italy, in Capri or Ajaccio. The descendant of a long line of aristocrats, Count Szembek, the father of a Polish Foreign Under-Secretary, was an illustrious dilettante, whose charm conquered the Conrads. He became the prototype of the *Il Conde*.

Polish patriotism is often a most exacting passion. As soon as Conrad became slightly known in England, his rising reputation penetrated to Poland, perhaps through his uncle Bobrowski's agency. When he refused to contribute to a weekly called *Wedrowiec* ("The Traveller") and shunned writing in Polish, a well-known Polish woman novelist, Mme Orzeszko, wrote a letter to him reprimanding him for abandoning the language of his fathers, and appealing, rather rudely, to his patriotism, demanded that he continue writ-

ing in Polish. This letter perturbed Conrad most deeply. Years after he used to complain to me: "Why impose such an obligation on me? Can't I run my trade according to my lights, inclination, and benefit? I am not a political exile, who has duties towards his past acts. I am a voluntary emigrant who left in search of a career. My career now consists in writing in English."

The action of Mme Orzeszko hurt him deeply, and for a number of years he avoided Poles.

Much later, with me and my wife, the new Polish generation came into his life, and warmed by our devotion and love for him and his family he consented to return on a visit to Poland. But until 1914 he still refused to meet any more Poles, and it was with the utmost difficulty that I induced him to receive a Polish newspaperman, J. Dabrowski, whose widow is now the most famous woman novelist in Poland.

. . . *and his English Make-up.*—A bowler hat, which he wore almost continuously, and a single eyeglass were the only English attributes in Conrad's physical appearance. He certainly looked foreign on the pavements of London, or along the Kentish lanes. When hearing him discoursing

about the English, one was amazed at his knowledge of their character and at his profound analy-



sis of their mentality. He himself, however, was distinctly alien to them externally and spiritually. English literature and tradition did not influence him more than French or even German. He did not take their mannerisms; he even never really got used to their food, although he never ceased to praise the quality of their foodstuff (as would any other unassuming and timid foreigner).

The opposite of a snob, he had a snobbish feeling when it came to his relationship with the

English world. He liked to be taken for an Englishman.

The gateway to his England was the sea; in the nineteenth century it was certainly the surest way to the core of English character. He liked having his home in England, and he admired the English most tremendously as: (1) untamable adventurers; (2) men of the highest civilization; (3) because of their phlegmatic appearance. He was sincerely, profoundly, admiringly, devotedly in love with England, to which he also had a deep gratitude for the opportunities she offered him and for the success he achieved in this country.

But, by Jove, how he loved to complain about the English and their mannerisms, obtuseness, and lack of sense of humour. He, then, looked pleased, like a mother superficially upbraiding her child, on whom she is doting.

I Write a Play with Conrad.—One night in Capel House while we were discussing Arnold Bennett's first great theatrical success *Milestones* the idea came to Conrad's head that we two should write a play. I had been telling him what a tremendous amount of money Bennett was making out of the theatre, while Conrad's income at

that time—early 1914—was less than a thousand a year. The idea of making heaps of money on a play flashed through his mind and left it as quickly. But he saw me inflamed with the thought of working in collaboration with him and, touched by my enthusiasm, he wanted to be kind and friendly to me. Anyway he always wanted to try his hand at playwriting, and here was an opportunity. The whole thing began as a joke.

We began by flattering each other, commending warmly the new scheme and toying with it. It was already late at night. As usual we were sitting around the fire-place, sipping whisky, nibbling at cheese, and talking away cheerfully.

Having agreed that the idea was magnificent, having divided the profits of its production and shared in our mutual glory, having decided that Conrad was not going to be present at the opening night, because he disliked immediate contact with the public, and that our wives would act as our representatives, it came to our minds that we must have a plot. Of course the subject was one of his novels. First we thought about *The Secret Agent* (later Conrad made a scenario out of it) and finally agreed on *Nostromo*.

At the time when we were talking, in 1914, rev-

olutions were ravaging Mexico, and the drunkard general Victoriano Huerta made himself temporary dictator of the country. We combined hence the Nostromo country with our vague notions of Mexico, and decided to make it the background of the play.

Before agreeing on the details we placed the protagonists. There was to be a South-American intellectual, artist, and patriot leading the revolt in the name of the people against a ruthless dictator, who dies exclaiming: *"Je meurs honteusement, mais glorieusement, pour des principes que je meprise,"* because in his heart he was an aristocrat, and here it came to him to lead the masses. There was the dictator, a fat, overbearing, drunken ruffian, the leader of the reactionary, graft-loving mob, who never ceases to appeal to God—*"Mais son Dieu c'est la bouteille."* There was the heroine—I remember we gave her the name of Antonia—an insignificant rose of the wilderness; there were a couple of European engineers, a semi-political club, which also served as a place of gathering for the more distinguished natives and foreigners.

Of course it was Conrad who mainly invented the plot, the scenery, and the decorations. He

talked vivaciously, describing the tropical heat and the heat of the battle, the siege of the club by the dictator, the riot on the Central Place, the nervous gestures of the Latins and the not less nervous gestures of the English. Because, as he insisted, in battle the English, whatever may be said to the contrary, behave with as much nervousness as any Latin. He depicted the heavy and dull drinking of the foreigners and the inspired intoxication of the natives. He sketched with a few phrases the "Plaza Central," its baroque architecture, its broken statues—I heard the silence between the fighting and the whip-like explosions of the revolvers. By heavens, Conrad was a great descriptive narrator! When years later I went to Mexico and there witnessed fighting and revolutions, and made friends with fat generals and visionary dreamers—all the time, while history was enacted in front of me, I was thinking: "Here they are staging Conrad's play for me alone." The dreamer, artistic patriot was Diego Rivera, with his flamboyance, his readiness for action, and his complete scepticism as far as social or political problems were concerned. He had the wish to improve conditions, and that is why he must fight against the rotten existing order. It happens that

the existing order was a kind of liberal socialism, tainted with nationalism, hence Diego was a Communist of the Trotsky blend.

And the drunken general? Was not the War Minister Serrano, or old Eugenio Martinez, just this type?

And the crowds as moved by Conrad—I witnessed once on the Zokalo, in Mexico City, the same sinister murmur of the mob—the cracks of rifle fire. And those foreign engineers and investors—honest, straightforward men when dealing at home, but considering fair game anything in the "colonies"—I wonder sometimes if my love for Mexico is not tinged with a subconscious vision inspired by Conrad.

Thus we found the plot, the actors, and the background of our play. Now came the question in which language to write it. And a fancy took Conrad to use French for this purpose. He always wished to write something in French, and he thought French to be the theatrical language *par excellence,* with its sonorous sounds, its precise almost mathematical renderings of thoughts, its lack of nonsense in the structure. And French it had to be.

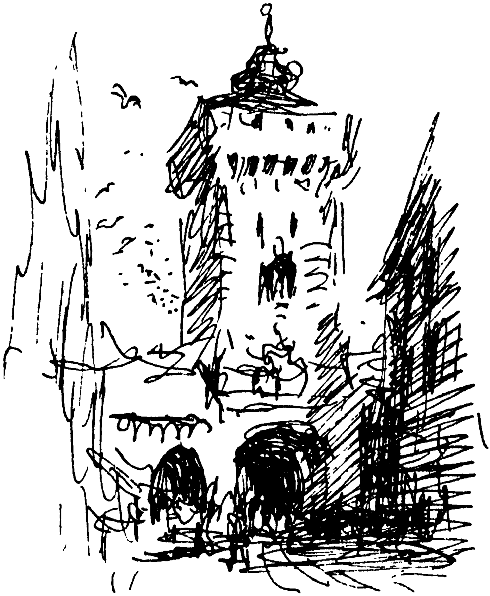
By that time it was almost three in the morning.

Everything about the play was fixed, now we must put it down in writing. But after looking through his desk Conrad discovered he had no paper left. He had just recovered from an attack of gout and all his writing paraphernalia were in his bedroom, where Jessie was fast asleep. On tiptoe, noiselessly, we looked in every imaginable corner of the house, till finally we discovered in the kitchen several sheets of paper ruled in squares, obviously for kitchen accounts. This we took and started our work. Our work was stopped in the morning with the beginning of the domestic activities of the house.

Now for months every available week-end we worked on the play, pleased like children with a new toy. Indeed, this common work with Conrad is among my most pleasant memories. (Conrad insisted on our continuing to write it on the kitchen paper.)

At that time my wife invited the Conrads to spend a summer on the estate she shared with her mother and sisters, and we decided to finish the play in Poland. Alas, it was never to be completed. The manuscript of it I left in the safe keeping of a friend of mine in Switzerland, but I have not seen him since the War and I cannot trace his address.

CHAPTER EIGHT



The Journey into the Past

SEVERAL years had passed since the Conrad family had made a trip abroad. The children were then infants; now Boris was nearly sixteen and John ten. Innumerable preparations were made, and Jessie busied herself with all the details,

and everybody lived in excitement for many days. The forthcoming journey was not an ordinary one.

Conrad was returning to the country which he had left some forty years before (he always overlooked the few, sad days he spent there at the funeral of his uncle), the country in which he had been born, which he has loved in his own way, which he was most anxious to revisit now that he achieved abroad everything he attempted to do, which he wanted to present to his wife and sons.

Jessie was stirred at the thought that at last she was going to know the land which gave her her husband, which was responsible for all those traits which made him different to all other men she met in England, and which have been ascribed to his national heritage. She was eager to look with her own eyes at those places which she glimpsed through his words, and to hear spoken around her this Polish language which he used only in his feverish nightmares.

The boys, as boys do, were thrilled at the prospect of an extensive travelling holiday.

In order to enjoy the sea as long as possible—the sea which he had not sailed for so long—Conrad chose the longest crossing, from Harwich

to Hamburg, and thence via Berlin to Cracow, in the proximity of which lay the estate of my wife.

We left London on the 29th of July without bothering about the war clouds which were collecting. It is true that both Conrad and myself consulted perfunctorily some of our friends in journalism and politics, but nobody predicted war at such short notice. We left without misgivings.

In Harwich we boarded the boat and, as it was already near midnight, we went straight to our berths. On the following day Conrad rose with the dawn, after a sleepless night, and briskly paced the deck. Forgotten habits re-entered his mind and body. One could see that once more he was back in his seafaring days. He introduced himself to the captain and the officers, trying to reminisce with them about his old calling, old sailing ships, old times. By every wink of his eye, by every gesture, by the use of naval slang, he was trying to make them see that he was an experienced sailor. But the captain knew Conrad to be some kind of a professional author and obviously thought that he was another of those passengers—amateur globe-trotters—who try to show off before a professional. Consequently he looked down on him

as only a sailor can look down on a landlubber. And the more Conrad fussed, the more the captain looked askance at him and finally he gave him clearly to understand that he thought him to be a liar. The more irritated Conrad grew, the more contemptuous became the captain. Thus Conrad failed to impress his sons and ourselves. Really the scene was painful, and there was some pathos in it.

We stayed the night in Hamburg, visited the town rapidly and reached Berlin on the following day. Here everything was bustle and noise. War was in the air. Already then a subconscious feeling of resentment against all foreigners was surging around us. On hearing us speak English the Germans had unfriendly looks for us. In the Friedrichstrasse Station a porter jostled Jessie, damning the English. But official courtesy was preserved.

We reached Cracow on the evening of 1st August 1914, on the very day that Austria mobilized. We stopped at the Grand Hotel, and were received by the proprietor Mr Chronowski, who came in person to pay his respects to the Conrads. My wife went the same evening to her mother's place Goszcza, in order to prepare for the reception

of our guests, unmindful of the approaching war, of the mobilization order, and quite regardless of the fact that her estate was situated beyond the Austrian frontier on Russian territory, in the area where later on cruel fighting lasted for over one year.

After dinner, Jessie and John, tired with the strenuous journey, retired to bed, while Conrad, accompanied by Boris and myself, went out to renew his acquaintance with the old city. I wanted to take them straight to the central square, the famous "Rynek." "No, my dear Joseph," said Conrad, "I want to see Rynek as I have remembered it all these years, as one sees it from the side view of the Florian Gate under the shadow of the Church of the Holy Virgin." And without hesitation, after forty years of absence, he chose his way in the meander of narrow streets and broad public squares, and conducted us with certain step to the appointed place, whence we slowly approached the Rynek. At its entrance in the shadow of the majestic Church of the Holy Virgin we stopped, awaiting the call of the bugle (*Hejnal*) which has marked the hours for over six hundred years. Conrad, proud of his memory, with pious zeal ex-

plained to Boris that this call celebrates the death of a bugler, who in the thirteenth century was stationed to watch out for a possible attack from marauding Tartar bands. He saved the city by giving the signal, but fell transpierced by an enemy's arrow.

Then Conrad conducted us around the town, showing to his son the reliques of the past, and finally brought him to the house where he lived some forty years before. There we stood for a considerable time. Conrad ceased talking to his son, he was obviously living again in Cracow, returning in spirit to moments he forgot for forty years, back in his youngster's days. From time to time he dropped a phrase in Polish: "Where are those ancient chains, which formerly marked the outlets of the streets?" . . . "No, don't show them to me, I will find them myself" . . . "And, Joseph, the knife of the fratricide, is it hanging still?" . . . "Wait, wait, let me remember" . . . "Boris, this was a time which you, more lucky, will never know" . . . "Forty years since I have been here, but to-night it seems to me as if I had left it only yesterday. Forty years!" The night was advancing, and remembering his tiring journey I sug-

gested returning to the hotel. "Not yet, Joseph, let me see the Barbacan." "But Jessie—" "No, this is my homecoming."

Never before was it so clear in my mind that Conrad, with all his strange adventures, his achievements, his fame, and his genius, was after all nothing else than what I am—a Pole, who had been bored in his native town, but who had veneration for it.

When I look back at that moment every detail stands clearly in my mind. Sharply outlined against the cold rays of the moon, the blue shadows of the twin towers falling in drastic lines on the place, broken on their way by the contours of smaller grey buildings. The silence around is as complete as it sometimes happens in small towns, when everybody is in bed, and beasts and animals do not dare to break the spell. I see Conrad standing at the corner of the place in his greyish suit, an old-fashioned bowler hat on his head, awry as in moments of excitement. Boris in his heavy spectacles, with an eager face, listening to his father and myself, deeply impressed that I am witnessing such a scene.

Conrad was a temperamental man who in a few moments could pass through a whole gamut of

visible emotions. Here in this ancient city of his forefathers his emotion became calm and silent. First he talked incessantly to his son, then in Polish a few words to me, and now he became silent. Slowly we walked back. At the entrance to the hotel, he kissed me on both cheeks, the ancient Polish custom, which I had never seen him do before, and which in fact he held in detestation. I swear he did it unconsciously, automatically. And then we separated for the night.

On the following day the enchantment of his emotions still held him in its grip. He came down for his breakfast, with deep furrows under his eyes, his eyes, generally so changing and vivacious, now darker and steadier. He scarcely said any words in English to his family, addressing me all the time in Polish and French.

To-day he was going to show his town to his beloved wife. And of course we drove first to the Wawel.

The Wawel is the hill towering above Cracow on which stand the buildings most precious to a Pole. It is the most memorable soil in Poland. It is the symbol of everything Polish. Before Poland regained independence it used to be the one great fact that Poland had been great and free.

It contains the castle of the Kings of Poland, the oldest cathedral church, the most ancient building in the country. There rest the remains of all Polish Kings and many of the great men of Poland. It is her heart!

The day was full of majestic, warm, August sun. We ascended the hill. The last time Conrad had seen the royal castle it was in a state of complete abandon. The Austrian Government had been using the old kings' palaces as army barracks, while the cathedral church, where forty Polish Kings were crowned, served as a garrison church to the soldiery. Old fresco paintings were covered with whitewash, delicate columns and window frames were walled in, invisible under the coarse plaster. The whole of the gardens and grounds of the spacious hill were built over with dreary looking hospitals and store-houses.

Now it was different. The cathedral, returned to the nation, had been restored, the castle was just being rebuilt. And so Conrad, after forty years, was showing it to his wife and sons in an appearance which he never contemplated himself. They wandered everywhere, peering into dark crypts where kings, statesmen, and poets are buried; they knelt before the ancient dark crucifix of

the Queen Yadwiga. In one of the majestic chapels, all gold and lace-like sculpture, a Mass was being read. Jessie bowed her head and, an indifferent Protestant, joined in the prayers of the Catholic religion, overcome with sentiment and emotion.

During those hours of our pilgrimage Conrad remained in an attitude of astonished and deep emotion. Besides a few words of comment to his wife and sons, he kept mostly silent as if he were listening to some unspoken words. . . . The past was talking to him . . . and to him alone. . . .

He made no attempt to conceal his emotion. As we emerged from the cool interior of the cathedral he said to me: "Dear Joseph, it is a great happiness to me that at last I have come here with my wife and sons and have shown them that *il y a quelque chose derrière moi.*"

And in this saying was the real soul of Conrad, his true sentimental entanglement. At that moment Conrad realized that everything he achieved, glory, writing masterpieces, his sailor prowesses, he had done because there had been a background to him, an ancient culture—a spirit behind him, the spirit which erected Wawel, which made that, through all vicissitudes, his country was still alive.

(And I was thinking of myself—what shall I do, still clinging to my country and with all the opportunities offered to me abroad?)

The whole day we roamed around Cracow. We saw the ancient churches, the venerable seats of learning, we strolled through narrow streets, looked at faded pictures, took in the far vistas on the banks of the Vistula River, contemplated the statues of old builders of Poland. And everywhere we went the spirit of the past preceded us—and our conversations were tuned to the old echoes.

Thus we spent the first day of Conrad's return to his country, recalling memories of the past. To an old man returning famous and celebrated to his country, to a country which he left in his youth, poor and without any prospects, everything must seem smaller, more modest, and more insignificant. It seems to him that his native town has grown older. But on Conrad the town of Cracow made a contrary impression. When he left it in his youth it had been but an unimportant provincial town (with hidden beauties and secrets), where the relics of a splendid past lay neglected in the dust. While he was away the old cathedral was restored, the castle given back to

the people, the streets paved, the vast grounds changed into smart public gardens. Conrad's pride in the past was enhanced by his pleasure in the present.



And another happy revenant of the past was there to increase his enjoyment. When in the evening we were returning to the Grand Hotel we heard in the street an elderly man crying out in astonishment, "My little Conrad—Konradku." Conrad turned his head, hesitated one second, and then calling "Konstanty" fell into the arms of the stranger. It was his old friend and school-fellow,

Konstanty Buszczynski, who recognized Conrad after forty years. There followed a lengthy emotional torrent of reminiscences and memories of souvenirs which had faded a long time ago, of people who had been dead for years.

Thus we spent one day, one whole day in the past. And the day was the 1st of August 1914. The day of the Austrian mobilization, the day on which War finally became an existing fact leading to four years of horror and misery.

Indeed, for those around us the only thing that seemed real was the War, the only problem was the one of the future. While for us—for this one short day—the only things which seemed worth while were the shadows of the past, and our only companions were the ghosts of forgotten days.

It seemed fateful that Conrad returned to Poland on the only date which hid in its bosom the unfulfilled dreams of his fathers, the coming freedom of his country.

People around us talked incessantly of hostilities, of fears and of hopes—and we dreamt about the past.

But the day came to an end. On the following day we went to visit K. Buszczynski on his estate of Gorka Narodowa in the proximity of Cracow—

and that marked the end of our journey into the past.

Immediately afterwards we were caught by the meshes of hostilities.

Not hearing about my wife and worried about her, I hired a motor-car and went with Boris to look for her. The distance was small, less than twenty miles, but the last few miles were beyond the Austrian frontier. In a whirlwind we went, but at the frontier we were stopped by Austrian soldiers who would not let us pass, but added consolingly that the Russian troops had retired several miles inland, and that there were many opportunities for my wife to return to Cracow. In fact, back in town, we found her safe. And that was the last she saw of her home in peace. Later, during a whole long year, the war waged round her house, while most of the time she, with her mother, small sisters, and a small boy of a brother, was surrounded there by the avalanche. Hidden in the cellar, she saw a bayonet charge in the very yard of her house. After the return from a flight she saw in her own room the scattered remains of a man's brain on the wall.

After a deliberate council we decided that my wife should accompany the Conrads into the

mountain place of Zakopane, because it was unthinkable to let them return to England through the enemy lines without permits and passports. On the other hand, the moment arrived for me to serve my country, where I could do it best, in England and in France.

I do not remember where the Conrad family stayed in Zakopane. I know that after a tedious journey they arrived there safely, and were well taken care of by admirers and friends they easily made, and that the place suited them well. Conrad himself was soon quite at home there and used to drop in at the different *cafés*, the "Morskie Oko" and at "Karpowicz," and chat for hours with the few Poles who were living at Zakopane at that time. I remember that he mentioned such names as Zeromski, Zulawski, and Nalepinski, all three well-known writers. He also read many works of modern Polish literature, but was not particularly struck with them, although he was always politely tolerant in speaking of them. He grew greatly attached to a lawyer named Kosch and often mentioned him after his return to London. Kosch was of great assistance to him in his return to England, lending him money for the journey, and charging himself with all the details of it.

In the meantime friends in London were growing anxious about the Conrad family, caught by the War in Austria. Edward Garnett, Pinker and others called on me or wrote, asking for news. Finally, Mr Penfield, the American Ambassador in Vienna, to whom Walter Page, Conrad's American publisher and Ambassador in London, had applied for information, grew very anxious on their account and eventually succeeded in obtaining a permit for their return on condition that they travelled via Italy, who had not as yet entered hostilities. So it came about that on 8th October the Conrads left Poland, travelling via Vienna, where they made a stay of several days *en route* for Genoa. There they took a boat which landed them within a few days at Greenwich.

It is not difficult to picture the joy of all of them —Conrad himself not excepted—at finding themselves once more at home and among those to whom they had grown so attached. Here occurred an incident which, as far as I know, has never been made public. Jessie was so thrilled by the journey and by all her experiences that when the passport official began to question her, she answered with the one and only German word she knew *"Donnerwetter!"* Consternation, followed

swiftly by suspicion on the part of the official, caused acute embarrassment to the unhappy Jessie! However, everything was soon satisfactorily explained!

When Conrad returned to England, I was in the United States, whence I returned just in time to spend Christmas at Capel House. I found everything there pursuing the usual even tenor of its way.

CHAPTER NINE



Conrad and the War

AT THIS reunion of ours in the stillness of Christmas night we heard from Capel House the distant thunder of guns in Flanders.

In the good village of Hamstreet life had been going on in its usual way, trickling peacefully amidst the subtle Kentish landscapes. The slow local trains kept their lazy time schedule, the station-master-and-ticket-collector pottered about as usual, and the same aura of quietism permeated the air.

The turbulence of War had not disturbed the centuries-old serenity of the English countryside. Of course the talk had been of War, but that in itself was nothing new, as there never has been, I suppose, a time when villagers did not discuss war, England's unending business. For many months to come "business as usual" was not only a slogan but a fact for the inhabitants of English provincial towns and hamlets.

The incident that stood out for me as marking the end of the placidity of stolid country folks I witnessed one Sunday at a much later period. I was standing in the local post office and grocery shop waiting for the attention of the woman behind the counter who was engaged in wiping a teacup. Suddenly the postmaster entered, and the ominous words "Kitchener is drowned" dropped from his lips. The cup crashed on the floor from the outstretched hands of the good woman; she stood frozen in her immobile attitude. The silence became unbearable confronted by our stillness—the man's grim face. Nobody said another word. I slipped out into the open, forgetting my errand.

For a long time after the War had started and he had returned to Capel House Conrad's life

remained unchanged in its essence even in its outward appearance.

For a man of his Olympic repose of mind, for a roving sailor who had witnessed killings and a few wars in the East, this one was but another human adventure on a larger scale and under another sun.

He was not worried for England, his adopted country, because he knew how impervious she has always been to any historical upheaval, blind in his faith in her invincibility, his skeptical mind having but one complex of hero-worship which centred around her.

His mental attitude towards the world was neither sentimental nor humanitarian. The ills of strangers did not touch him directly, and although on some occasions he was not averse to proclaiming himself a pacifist, his pacifism did not interfere with his fondness for picturesque pageants of military triumphs and his partiality for displays of physical, brutal vigour. The only classical maxim which I ever heard him quote was: *parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*. When it came to principles of governing mankind he was not a very moral person, I am afraid, and with Montesquieu he shrugged his shoulders at the thought of a

Chinese mandarin killed thousands of miles away.

I do not want to convey any idea that there was any callousness or inhuman indifference in his make-up. I wish only to state that in the adversities his generation was passing through, he contrived to keep a cool head, with an innate stoicism, and that the war craze, which affected many of the best minds, did not touch him.

For instance, he could not work himself up to the level of the general and popular intensity of hatred against the Germans, partly because he was too equanimous, partly, I must admit, because of his hereditary horror of the Russian Allies, but mostly because his thorough knowledge of humanity made him distrust and discard the gross exaggerations of rumours and of war propaganda. He did not think there was much to chose between the Germans and the Russians, and used to remark that even the best-behaved army, when on a battlefield or in an invaded country, does not behave like well-mannered schoolboys.

It must also be remembered that the first few months of the War he had spent in that part of Poland which had been an Austrian possession, and although he stayed in a secluded spot in the Tatra Mountains, it was not too far removed not

to be penetrated by the Austrian and German interpretation of war happenings, or by the tales of Russian savagery in Galicia, which was not less bloody than German brutalities in Belgium.

He never felt the urge to take a hand in the activities around him, as other writers did in all the belligerent countries, and he never applied to be made use of, as had been done even by such a mild and gentle pacifist as André Gide.

He thought himself completely incapable, mentally and physically, of meddling in politics or attempting to guide public opinion. All his life he kept silent on questions relating to the general conduct of public life, and before the War had never even voiced his personal ideas on any aspect of the Polish question, an attitude which had been counted against him by some of his countrymen.

Together with a great number of contemporary artists and writers he had no faith in politics as a factor which might bring any substantial relief to suffering humanity, because, he reasoned, politics cannot change human nature, which alone is the origin of good and evil. He considered politics, confusing it with demagogy, to be an easy way to achieve a comfortable career. He neither trusted the wisdom of the politicians nor their honesty,

nor even their good intentions. Since he never had any personal contact with them, whatever he thought of them was based on hearsay and on gossip gleaned from novels not seldom written by frankly biased men of letters, like E. Zola, Sardou, or Disraeli.

He used to repeat that war did not change fundamentally the mentality of people; it only intensified some of their latent traits of character. Out of a peaceful man it made a pacifist, and it turned a brutal individual into a sanguinary beast. In a way he himself had been a proof of this assertion as far as his Polish sentiments were concerned, which, until then more or less dormant, now came to the fore. He became very deeply immersed in Polish problems, he commenced to manifest and assert his Polish origin more vigorously than ever before, and even tried to add the weight of his literary standing in England to the propaganda in favour of a propitious solution of Poland's future.

The fact that, at the beginning of the War, he had stayed in Poland, and that in Zakopane he spent much time in talks and discussions with ardent Polish patriots, had not passed without profoundly affecting his national sentiments, which, once back in England, were constantly rekindled

by my own presence and my conversations with him.

To describe this phase of Conrad's life is rather embarrassing for me, because until then it was always I who had been looking up to Conrad, as was natural for a young man who ardently loved and admired his older and famous friend. It was I who constantly asked for his advice, who listened to his viewpoints, who accepted readily his admonitions.

Now, however—in Polish matters and even often in politics in general—it was he who began to listen to my interpretation of political facts and near-facts. He trusted me, and had faith in my lack of selfishness in anything touching political work; in fact, he not seldom grumbled at my lack of personal ambition in this direction.

I hope that the preceding interpretation of one aspect of our mutual relationship will not seem in any way disrespectful to the memory of my great countryman, inasmuch as it bears on a side of his activities which is of no great importance when compared with his whole work. It concerns only a few articles, some (still unpublished) memoranda, which cannot add much to his lustre.

To explain Conrad's Polish sentiments during

the War, I must define my position during those memorable years.

Since 1911 I had been engaged in Polish political work in England, conducted through the "Polish Bureau," started and directed by me under the auspices of "The Polish National Council." This organization consisted of delegates of different Polish political parties, mostly conservative, established in Austrian Poland, with the unofficial participation of Poles from the German and Russian parts. Its aim had been to work for the freedom of Poland by acquainting Western public opinion with the most important Polish problems through the medium of agencies established in Paris, Rome, Switzerland, and England. . . .

. . . At first Conrad did not share my faithful trust in the resurrection of Poland as a result of the War. He thought that it would end in a draw, the belligerents remaining on their positions with, maybe, some minor geographical rectifications of the frontiers.

The Russian Revolution made him change this point of view. But during the first year or so of the War the best he hoped for Poland was a partial reunion of the three provinces into one unit, but under an alien rule.

After his return from Poland, Conrad imagined that the so-called Austrian solution of the Polish problem was the most easily attainable. In his mind this plan ran on the following lines: a separate peace to be concluded with Austria-Hungary, which, in exchange for territorial cession in favour of Italy and Serbia, would receive parts of Russia and possibly of German Poland to form together with Galicia a third partner in the Dual Monarchy, either under the direct rule of the Austrian Emperor or under the sovereignty of Archduke Karl Stefan of Habsburg, popular in Poland and related to some of the noble Polish families.

This was the secret of the austrophile tendencies of Conrad, about which such a fuss was being made at the time, Arnold Bennett himself repeating the gossip, and people suspecting Conrad of undesirable leanings towards the enemy instead of taking into consideration his legitimate Polish aspirations. He resented these rumours, and they made him even more shy about expressing in the open his opinions on war politics.

. . . .

In later days of the War Conrad's favourite vision of Poland in the future, in the event of a crushing British victory, was to see her independ-

ent and connected with Great Britain in some tangible way, maybe as a partner in the British Commonwealth, with a status similar to the one enjoyed by self-governing Dominions. He imagined Prince Arthur of Connaught as the sovereign of Poland, Danzig a Free Town under British tutelage, thus giving Britain a foothold in the Baltic and to Poland the backing of the English Fleet. This idea, although never seriously put into operation, was entertained for a certain time, after the Russian Revolution, by persons close to the Admiralty and the War Office and, strange to say, by Lord Northcliffe.

From the sentimental point of view such a solution would have appealed most to Conrad in his double allegiance to Poland and England. He was also pleased when I reported to him a conversation which I had at that time with M. J. Caillaux, a former French Prime Minister, on this subject and how the latter got excited about a possibility, remote as it was, of a British prince on the Polish throne and how he exclaimed, "*Mais pourquoi pas un prince de la Maison de France?*" That is how the idea originated in France of an eventual candidature of Prince Sixte de Bourbon-Parme to the

Polish crown in the event of such a thing becoming possible.

But in this book of my reminiscences of Conrad and his literary contemporaries it would be superfluous to recall all the changing aspects of the Polish problem during the War, and to retell my experiences and all my conversations with Conrad on the subject nearest to my heart. He always agreed with me that, whatever our personal feelings might be, we must always advocate complete Polish independence. He was ever anxious to help my work, but reticent about doing anything in person, afraid of his impulsiveness and because he wished to avoid doing anything that might be unbecoming to a naturalized Britisher.

He wrote, at the beginning of 1916, on a rough draft supplied by me, an article, *A Note on the Polish Problem,* and two or three memoranda, handed to the Foreign Office and people in authority either by me or by Christopher Sandeman. Subsequently, in 1919, when I had already lost my immediate contact with him, he published also a lengthy article on *The Crime of Partition of Poland,* which is based on my books *La Pologne et l'Equilibre Européen* and *Considérations générales*

sur l'avénir économique de la Pologne, which I published in France during the War. In fact, in this study there are some passages almost literally translated by Conrad from the first named of my books.

I was always obliged to recount to Conrad every aspect of my work, down to the smallest details. In fact, minute psychological details and even the mannerisms of strong individualities not seldom interested him more than major affairs of general politics. Very often I had a strong feeling that he was more interested in the human psychology of war than in the drama itself. To the author of *Lord Jim* the sentimental and spiritual reactions of people towards the by-products of war, such as the possibility of rapid advancement, easy enrichment, intrigue for intrigue's sake, the poise of soldiers, seemed as interesting as the war bulletins. But just as he would not go to the Front, although such a visit could have been easily arranged, he preferred to dissect the psychology of the soldiers through the narratives of his friends who served as war correspondents, in particular Percival Gibbon. In the same way he liked to watch the reactions of politicians, society people, and warmongers through my own stories. Even more of a

recluse during the War than ever before or after, I rarely prevailed upon him to come to town, unless called by some urgent personal matters, and he was most unwilling to meet people in politics and society, who by then were more than eager to make his acquaintance. He definitely refused to meet some most interesting people, as for instance Lord Northcliffe, who not discouraged by his refusal, in his bluff way repeatedly invaded uninvited his home and finally conquered completely Jessie and Conrad, who loved to be liked and to be made a fuss about.

Hence whenever I was in England and had a moment to spare I went to Capel House. Sitting around the fire, which he liked to have in his den all the year round, I repeated to him all that had happened to me since I had seen him last. He would ask me all the details of my meetings with people, my conversations, even the *tournures des phrases* which have been used. His generally sad eyes would sparkle with curious interest, he would play, without noticing it, with his monocle hanging on a black silk string, and he would question me about the most beautiful Duchess of Sutherland, who had been plucky enough to spend years at her base-hospital in Calais, occasionally but rarely

dropping into Paris, to rest from her exacting work amidst the most sophisticated, most fashionable, and most intellectual society. He would ask about the mannerisms of Balfour, or the witticisms of Castellane, of great statesmen and obsequious sec-



retaries, of retired, all-wise generals and dashing subalterns, about dancing parties at Isadora Duncan's little palace in the Avenue de Messine, or the sinister gloom and silence of Schloss Zizers where the general of the Jesuits had fixed his abode. I would be obliged to repeat to him all the *bons mots* of Clemenceau, all the stupidities proffered by ex-

alted nonentities, the gossips of the kitchen of diplomacy and the lobbies of Parliaments. He was collecting material for a novel of war psychology, and the *Arrow of Gold* is slightly tinted with some of my adventures and things I have told him.

He took the most brotherly interest in my work and person, enjoying every success of mine, advising me, worrying about me, sentiments which can be traced in letters he has written to his friend R. Curle, Sandeman and others and which are in parts published either by Curle or by J. Aubry), to quote only those words written in August 1916 "the cause to which you are so friendly (resurrection of Poland) and for which Retinger is going to put his head into the noose unless wiser counsels prevail. . . ."

At the end of 1916 his son Boris joined the army and a few months later went to France. Conrad began to look upon the War as a personal affair. He worried tremendously about him, and inquired tirelessly whenever Boris came for a short leave to Paris to stay with me. He had become interested in the organization of the army, and in the troubles of young subalterns, and went so far as to write a memorandum on some minor points of army organization, the result of information re-

ceived from his son and his colleagues, which he made me hand over to some War Office high officials—I believe to General Macdonough, at that time Director of Military Intelligence. Almost simultaneously took place his visit to the "Q" ships and submarines, so often described by himself and others and which he enjoyed as a rare treat.

CHAPTER TEN



The End

. . . UNTIL a few months after the conclusion of the Armistice I remained in Spain most desperately ill, and in the usual illogical and uncomfortable position of a political exile.

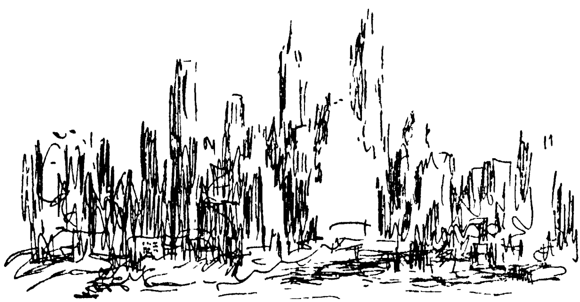
During this time most of my friends tried to console me as best they could, and I received from Conrad a few cheerful letters and some money. Anyway I did not worry much about the world at that time, suffering as I was from excruciating insomnia and complete physical prostration.

I finally left Spain in the spring of 1919, but for a long time I was still unable to work. Aimlessly I roamed around Central America, mostly in Mexico, looking on and later helping the natives in their struggle against the penetration of the dollar mentality and power. I went several times to the United States, very often spending weeks and weeks in hospitals in different towns and countries. I was living the life of a personage in Conrad's novels.

I did not return to England until 1924, a short time after Conrad's return from his triumphal visit to the United States. (I had been in Mexico at that time.) I went to the "Oswalds," his new place in Bishopsbourne, near Canterbury, and found him and his family in totally different conditions from when they used to be in Capel House. The house was spacious, Conrad had a nice car and a good chauffeur, there was an efficient secretary, Jessie did not type out his manuscripts any more and confined her domestic activity to supervising the kitchen. Conrad was earning good money and could afford all comfort which his age began to demand from him.

Conrad was then one of the most famous living authors, and his voyage to the United States

had been a succession of triumphal receptions. He told me how everybody had been cordial and attentive to him, from the commander of the liner in which he crossed the ocean to the most celebrated American artists and society people. He stayed with the Doubledays, the family of his pub-



lishers, and was entertained by them magnificently and discreetly, with all due care for his small mannerisms and petty foibles. While on this trip he had been impressed more than by anything else by the homage rendered to him by a swarm of little Polish girls dressed in national costumes, who had greeted him on his landing in New York, as representatives of the Polish colony in America. This charming hospitality, and sincere American admiration of the man and his work, finally overcame

Conrad's distrust of the nation and he discoursed with me about this trip with great enjoyment. I too told him about my adventures. We spent a long time talking things over and enjoyed recalling our mutual past.

But there was something amiss between us. He certainly showed all the outward signs of the greatest friendship and cordiality, while I, for sure, had the same devotion, fondness, and admiration for him as ever before. But the shadow of a woman stood between us, a distance of six years of fulfilment on one side and disappointment on the other. . . .

I went back to London and very shortly afterwards read in the papers the notice of his death.

It was a sad autumnal day, this 24th of August 1924, the day when I was in his presence for the last time, the day of his funeral at the Canterbury cemetery. A crowd of grave people, bowing their heads before his open grave. Lucky man—he died when he was at the apogee of his life work!


Sleep after toyle, port after stormie seas, ease after warre, death after life, does greatly please — Spenser